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THE ROAD-AGENT EMERGED INTO A CURIOUS OPENING IN THE HEART OF THOSE ROCKS, EVIDENTLY THE CRATER RENDEZVOUS.

Cool Chris,

THE CRYSTAL SPORT;

OR,

The Firebrand Detective' Mysterious Mission.

A Romance of Deadwood City.

BY JOS. E. BADGER, JR.

CHAPTER

FOR MORE THAN ROBBERY.

"STEADY, now, pard! Make a slip-up, and it may land ye in glory!"

"Reckon it's the right critter, then?"

"Our meat, to a dead moral!"

"All right. Which'll I take: two legs or four?"

"Four. Shut his wind with a yank, then take a cinch with the loose end, ag'in't my wanting ye. It's odds I throw him stiff, but if it should happen—"

"I'll be ready to climb the critter, never you worry, Hank."

These sentences passed rapidly between two coarsely clad fellows as they crouched under cover alongside the stage-road running into Deadwood from that point of the compass, and then, with their understanding complete, they separated a bit more widely, each pair of hands busy with the coils of braided leather which grease and smoke and patient manipulation had rendered as pliant and pliable as so much plaited silk.

Their covert had been carefully selected, with an eye to what was about to transpire. No person journeying either way along that road could detect aught of the ambush until it should be fairly sprung, yet a single swift stride would carry the hidden men to a point of vantage from whence they could make their casts with naught but lack of skill to hinder or to mar perfect success.

Their heads were slightly bent in acute listening, and they could measure each foot of advance on the part of their prize: only another score of those leisurely strides, and both horse and rider would be at "the dead line!"

Not a sound warned the unwary traveler, and even as those masked shapes broke cover with swiftly whirling lassoes, ready to kill if they could not capture, their destined victim was carelessly humming a bit of song as he swung along lazily in his saddle.

True to their aim, the flying loops closed over head of man and head of beast, the lassoes giving vent to cries of savage exultation as they flung both weight and muscle upon the ropes, one causing the startled horse to plunge and snort with terror, the other plucking rider from his careless seat, to fall with stunning force upon the stony ground.

"Snub your critter, then lend a hand in case of need!" cried the taller of the masks, at the same time springing upon his victim with vicious energy, hands dropping lariat to grip throat, compressing the wind-pipe so fiercely that any attempt at outcry would have been in vain.

But no such effort was made. Falling upon head and shoulder, the horseman was completely stunned and made no resistance to that savage assault.

The lesser rascal experienced little more difficulty in carrying out his part of the programme, for, as the lasso-loop closed surely about the throat of the sorrel horse, the roper took a swift turn with the slack around a convenient boulder, a deft hitch making all secure, thus leaving his hands at liberty to aid his comrade in case of need.

"Got him tighter'n a cayuse in double-cinch!" grimly declared the taller mask, glancing up at that offer of assistance. "Soothe down the boss critter, pard, and git out o' the road afore—I'll tote this bundle of luck—good or bad, I'm never telling ye!" and the road-agent picked that limp and nerveless shape up in his muscular arms, bearing it away from the stage road, among the thick-lying rocks, following hard upon the heels of the captured horse as led by his comrade.

A very brief space of time sufficed to carry all out of sight of the trail, and thus feeling beyond peril of discovery by any chance wayfarers, the two masked men paused in order to satisfy themselves a bit more thoroughly of the value of their capture.

Rudely dropping the prisoner to the ground, his immediate captor stooped over him, closely scanning that face, much as one might who felt recognition ought to follow that scrutiny.

There was little expression left in that face, just then. The dangerous jerk given his neck, added to the heavy fall upon the stony road, had caused all muscles to relax, and to a certain degree destroyed the personality which goes to make up what we term "expression." Just then that countenance might have been likened to one who had drunk to insensibility.

"Reckon it's the right critter, Hank?" ventured the shorter mask, leaning forward for a view, yet still holding fast to the uneasy horse.

"That's fer the boss to say, and not me," came the gruff reply. "We was to rope in whoever come this way, unless we knew they had a clean ticket; and so—"

"An' we didn't hev no time fer to stop an' ax him fu'st fer that ticket, nuther," cut in the other knave. "It's even divvy, Hank?" as he saw those hands slip inside the garments of the unfortunate wayfarer; but "Hank" was in no haste to reply.

His trained fingers were not long in summing up the contents of those pockets, and then, before going any further, he gruffly spoke:

"We'll make his own critter do the toting, pardner. Get all ready for the ja'nt, will ye, while I send up the smoke?"

Without waiting for a reply either way, Hank turned away from their unconscious victim, moving hither and yon as the stray bunches of grass and last year's pine-needles rendered necessary.

These were by no means in great abundance, for that was a desolate, almost barren tract; but the object he had in view did not require a very liberal supply of fuel, and ten minutes sufficed to complete his preparations.

Touching a lighted match to a bit of paper taken from his pocket, the road-agent quickly ignited the little pile of fuel, causing a dark, almost black spiral of smoke to climb the air, thus forming a signal which could be caught by watchful eyes for many a long mile, even in that wild, thinly-populated region.

Pausing barely long enough to make sure the tiny heap of damp fuel would burn to its ending, Hank turned aside to where his mate was busy with his part of the arrangements.

"All's ready for a lift, Hank, when you be," was his salutation. "Ef you reckon we'd better divvy now, than later on, why—"

"Oh, bite that off and swallow it, Jimmy! Wait and ask the boss for a divvy, if you're hungry for—eh?"

"It'd be more lead than gold, I reckon!"

"That's where your head's coming level, boy! I'd pretty nigh as quick try to pinch the boss in his own pockets, as to think of holding out on him this clatter. And so—boost, will ye?"

In sullen silence the lesser mask bore his part in what followed.

Between them, the insensible traveler was lifted into his own saddle, and tied securely there with one of the lariats used in effecting that capture; then the two knaves moved still further away from the stage road, plunging deeper into those gloomy hills.

Before long they came to where a couple of horses were tethered, and with a promptitude which evidenced their ownership, they took possession of the animals, and resumed their journey at a more rapid gait.

For some little time the captive swayed limply in the saddle, kept from falling by the lariat alone; then, little by little he seemed to rally from the shock he had received, and as he began showing signs of dull curiosity concerning himself and his surroundings, a halt was called by the taller mask, and the rope was slackened sufficiently for his removal from saddle to earth once more.

"Who are you, critter?" demanded Hank, in his gruffest tones. "What's yer name when ye're to hum—eh?"

"Name? I don't—my head is all—what's the matter?"

The captive spoke in husky, uncertain tones, and when he tried to lift a hand to his bruised head, the movement was pitifully weak and aimless; like an infant, he seemed unable to judge distance or direction correctly.

"You stubbed yer toe, an' tuck a tumble onto yer cabeza," facetiously answered the road-agent, with a covert wink at his pard, though that was rendered ineffectual by the half-mask which united with his shaggy beard in concealing his features from casual observation.

"I don't—my head! It's all—hold it fast! Don't let me fly all to bits, fer—ah—h—h!"

The luckless wayfarer ceased his efforts to arise, sinking back and looking like death for the moment. Yet life remained, and the fellow who answered to the name of Hank, gave a chuckle as his fingers tested the wrist-pulse.

"Playing it mighty fine, pardner, but 'twon't pan out wuth a cent!"

"Then he hain't—"

"That's what, so you hold your hush, pardner," interposed Hank. "Jest keep a good ready fer to bounce the slippery critter ef he takes a notion to jump over the traces, will you?"

"You bet I will! An' he'll never want more'n the one jumpin', nyther!" coarsely declared the other knave, standing on the alert.

It seemed the height of cruelty to even speak of that ghastly pale being as playing a part with hope to deceive, but such was Hank's meaning, and such he clearly believed to be the situation.

His first move was to slip the belt-buckle which held that girdle of webbing about the prisoner's middle, and he seemed at ease only when those heavy revolvers were beyond reach of that nerveless right hand.

"Best this way, I'm reckoning, critter," he said with a short, hard chuckle as that precaution was completed. "Orders was to snipe ye in, stiff or limber, an' we'd drop ye quicker'n you could work a trigger ef ye was to try it on; still, this way feels a heap sight more comf'table, to my notion."

"Tryin' to chin him to death, be ye, pardner?"

"That's all right, boy. When you've played a game like this as often as your uncle Solomon, maybe you'll know half as much. For now—Hold your breath, stranger, ef you're any ways ticklish 'bout the short ribs, for hyer I'm coming at ye!"

With a low, amused chuckle which betrayed in part how thoroughly satisfied he was with the game as far as gone, Hank once more fell to searching that unresisting person, and this time extending his duty further than those previously inspected pockets.

The captive made no resistance, although it was easy to see that he was slowly recovering his bodily powers, and that he was at least dimly conscious of trouble having befallen him.

From those pockets were turned sundry articles, some of which made the lesser villain snap his eyes with covetous longing, and when a pocket-flask with silver cup attached was revealed, his hidden lips gave an audible smack!

"Thrapple choked up with alkali-dust, eh, pard?" laughingly asked Hank, at the same time tossing the coveted article over to that eager hand. "All right. Sample it, boy, and if there's enough left for a man I'll help ye turn the bottom on top. Drink hearty, pard."

Between two such men a flask of that size was quickly emptied, and then Hank completed his search, for the time being at least.

"Mighty little to divvy up atwixt the lot, Hank," suggestively muttered his mate, as the taller mask began returning the small amount of money to their prisoner's pockets, just as found. "Ef they done the work like we're doin' of it now, reckon they'd stop to think of us? Wouldn't they say findin's keepin's? Wouldn't they—"

"Oh, hush! You kin make a man more tired-er than any other critter I ever met up with, boy!"

Hank finished replacing those various articles, then once more attempted to question the stranger, now speaking sharply and harshly, then assuming a wheedling, coaxing manner when the first failed.

But now, as before, he had little more than his trouble for reward. The stranger could not, or would not, comprehend his meaning, and hardly a word could be drawn from his lips save a plaint of paining head and thoroughly befogged wits.

"What makes it so?" he thickly muttered, staring dazedly about, yet making no actual effort to regain his feet. "I felt all right until—who hit me? Was it—where's my head? I can't—look out! I'm going to fall again!"

His fingers clutched spasmodically at the ground, and his lids closed as though his brain was turned dizzy by a whirling tumble. His face turned white and his muscles contracted until an entirely different facial expression met those keenly watching eyes.

"Looks like he was going to croak, pardner!" muttered the shorter mask, in half-awed tones as he stood watching their prize.

"Which is what he wants it to look like," came the skeptical reply. "Oh, he's a mighty slippery cuss, but it takes your uncle Solomon to foolish the fooler, and so—Stiddy!"

"What ye gwine do now, pard?"

"That's all right. You stand ready to jump the critter if he tries to make a break," gruffly ordered Hank, at the same time unknottin' the lariat which had been wound closely about their captive when taken out of the saddle.

That precaution appeared wholly unnecessary, however, since the unfortunate traveler made no attempt at breaking away, even when his person was entirely freed from bonds. He seemed thoroughly dazed by his heavy fall, and Hank experienced no trouble whatever in his purpose: that of removing both coat and vest from the stranger.

"What comes next?" asked his comrade, sulkily, as Hank cast those confiscated garments over his own saddle.

"Give him a boost up, and we'll be mogging along, Jimmy," answered Hank, pushing their prisoner a bit nearer his horse. "Reckon they're thar and waiting for us, by this. Eh?"

"Jimmy" made no answer, but sulkily assisted in securing the unknown in his saddle as before; then, mounting their own animals, the road-ruffians rode briskly away, plunging still deeper into the hills.

Whither were they bound? What doom awaited the luckless traveler?

CHAPTER II.

THE CRATER RENDEZVOUS.

FOR little more than half an hour longer the two road-agents pressed forward through the hills with their captive, speaking nothing, caring nothing it seemed, save to reach their present

destination with as little further loss of time as might be.

Their prisoner gave them no trouble, although kinder-hearted mortals might well have worried over that strange, semi-idioty, born of that severe fall when the lasso took grip.

Faint mumblings came from those thickened lips, and ever his plaint was of his head: now it had been lost from his shoulders, and he was begging aid in finding it; then he would spit and sputter in helpless distress, declaring that a swarm of bees were preëmpting his skull for a gun, and he couldn't keep them out of his mouth and nostrils!

Jimmy seemed a bit shy of his oddly-mumbling captive, but Hank was made of sterner metal, or else his natural suspicion was of ranker growth, for the more wildly the traveler raved, the more jealously did he guard against a possible break-away.

"Not that you could turn the trick, critter, so never ye think it," he bluntly asserted, after giving another warning. "We was told to go fetch, and that's just what we're doing. Time we turn ye over to the boss—well, mebbe you'll see what you do see, then!"

All this seemed a mere waste of breath, so far as the prisoner was concerned. He stared dazedly into that dark mask so long as its wearer was speaking, but when that gruff voice ceased, his odd maunderings were resumed, and so it was when another halt was called.

"Reckon we're fur 'nough, pardner," declared Hank, drawing rein and slipping out of the saddle, at the same time casting a keen, comprehensive glance around the spot.

"But this hain't—"
"Play it was, then, and hold your hush, boy!" sternly interposed the leading spirit, making a swift gesture to back up his words. "That clapper of yours needs wiring up a good bit, Jimmy, and you want to mind it don't get the doctoring, too!"

"Doctor—where is he?" huskily exclaimed the prisoner, with an unsteady movement of his head as his eyes glanced around in quest of something suggested by those words. "Call him in to—my head is—what is it? I surely had a head—once—but now—doctor!"

"Shut up, dug-gun ye!" commanded Hank, one hand closing over those calling lips the same instant. "Yelp out like that again, and I'll plaster your gob so tight shut that you'll have to sing through your nose for the rest of your life!"

"What's the peppergram, anyway, pardner?" asked Jimmy.

"I'm going on, but you're stopping here until further orders," was the reply. "Keep all eyes open, you mind, for this slippy cuss isn't playing all these roots for nothing."

"He's turned crazy if he wasn't born that-a-way!"

"Don't you think it, pard? He's smarter now than a dozen like you, and I'd never leave you alone with him if I could help it."

"What ye doin' of it fer, durn ye?"

"Because orders is orders, and all the more so when they come from a boss like the boss," oracularly declared Hank, at the same time running his hands over the bonds holding their prize. "You're all right as long as you keep your eyes peeled and your wits on top, Jimmy. And maybe it'll help you do all that when I tell you so much—"

The conclusion of that sentence came in a whisper so guarded that Jimmy alone caught its full meaning, and he only, because those heavily-bearded lips fairly brushed his ear.

Seemingly satisfied now that their cause would not suffer through negligence or lack of vigilance, Hank took a final glance over those bonds, then turned away to where his horse was patiently waiting.

Swinging himself into the saddle, he paused long enough to add:

"Hold the critter fast, pardner. Ef you can't hold him hot, hold him cold. You know what that means, I reckon?"

"Means that I'll open a hole big 'nough fer a hungry dog to jump through, fu'st clatter!"

"Right you are, Jimmy! Kill him rather than lose him any other way, and don't waste any cartridges in warning shots, either."

Slackening reins and touching up his mount with the spurs, Hank rode away, quickly losing sight of the others as he passed among the rocks.

When fairly out of their sight, and far enough away to have distance deaden the echo of his hoof-strokes, the mask turned to the left at an abrupt angle, then pressed along still more briskly.

"They'll be growing hot under the collar waiting, I reckon," he mused with a half-chuckle at the thought. "If they saw the smoke—and that's what they were to be looking after—they'd make for the crater, and waiting is mighty slow work, such times!"

That ride did not last long. Swinging himself out of the saddle, at the same time taking from his pommel the articles removed from the person of the Unknown, Hank stepped briskly along that rugged way, now seemingly about to be barred by a towering mass of dingy gray rocks.

It appeared to be a case of "no thoroughfare," but the road-agent was thoroughly familiar with his present surroundings, and moved on without hesitation, closely followed by his well-trained steed.

Turning to the right when those gray rocks barred their way, Hank passed along for a few rods close to that grim base, but then turned abruptly to the left, entering a narrow gash through the rocks barely wide enough for a horse to pass through.

After several more turns, all so abrupt that one could see but a few feet in advance, the road-agent emerged into a curious opening in the heart of those rocks: into what evidently was the "crater" rendezvous of the gang spoken of by Hank.

As he did so, he caught a glimpse of human figures seated a few rods beyond, their faces turned his way, evidently in expectation of his coming, since one of them flung up a hand and cried:

"At last, Redmond! Well, what luck, old fellow?"

"Smoky luck, boss, or I'd never have sent it up," answered the road-agent, stepping clear of the rocks, still followed by his horse. "You glimpsed it, of course?"

"Why would we be here, else?"

"What did you strike, Hank?" asked the other, both upon their feet now, and each one betraying eagerness or anxiety to hear the truth. "You surely didn't—"

"If you called us off for a false scent, old man, I know you'll pay the penalty!"

"If it's a false scent, boss, you kin blame orders, not me," just a bit doggedly returned Hank, dropping the garments at the feet of the two men, both of whom wore half-masks similar to that which helped his shaggy beard to conceal his own features.

"You sent up the smoke. That told us to draw off the trail and come here to hear news. We're on deck. You've come. Now—out with it, old man!"

"That's easy said, and so—I've struck color on my lead, boss!"

"What sort of color? And how rich?"

"That's for you to decide, sir," and his head nodded toward the coat and vest. "I fetched a few specimens for assay; maybe you'd better see what you can make out of 'em, boss."

One of the masks stooped to pick up the clothes, turning them around with a keen glance at the same time, then muttering:

"No red paint!"

"Because we didn't have to upset the pot, boss. Just roped him, as easy."

"What did you do with him, then?"

"Left him out yonder, with Jimmy Johnson on deck. Reckoned maybe you'd rather settle first just when and how you'd see the fellow, than to have him run in here without fair warning."

"That's where your head's flat on top, Redmond; I just would," the chief replied, at the same time exploring the hidden recesses of those garments with nimble fingers.

Hank Redmond watched all this, with his coarse beard twitching slightly, as though from a veiled smile of grim amusement. He said nothing more until that hasty search was completed and a growl of angry disappointment came from the lips of the chief.

"A water-haul, or I'm a liar! What did you tote these duds here for, Redmond? There's nothing of value in them, and if you haven't—"

"Sure you've looked deep enough, boss?"

"What do you mean by that, Hank?"

Before answering, Redmond slung the confiscated belt of arms upon his left arm, then took hold of the coat, running his finger-tips over a certain portion of the garment. Pausing at length, he reached out the coat, saying coolly:

"Feels like there might be paper of some sort hid away in there, sir, don't it?"

With a partly-smothered ejaculation of new interest, the chief caught at the coat, then flashed forth a keen-pointed knife to rip open the cloth and extract a folded paper, sure enough!

"I happened to feel it crackle, like, ye see, boss," added Redmond, with a touch of triumph in his tones. "Of course I didn't stop to take a closer look, for I reckoned you might want to—Eh?"

"Look at it now, then, confound you!" exploded the other mask, tossing the unfolded paper that way. "Nothing but tailor-padding! Just a blank, and it's big dollars to little cents that your whole haul don't pan out a whit more valuable!"

Redmond gave a half-stifled imprecation as he picked up and stared at the paper, for the chief had spoken true: it was a blank, with never a touch of pen or printer's ink to lend it value.

"What more have you to offer, Hank?" dryly asked the chief, after a brief silence. "Do you reckon the fellow himself would pan out any richer on closer examination?"

"That's for you to say, boss," answered the road-agent, crestfallen at the outcome of his supposed discovery. "For me, I did what I was told: yanked in the first stranger that came my way."

"I'm not blaming you so hard, old fellow" the chief hastened to add, "for any one of us might have made the same mistake. And, after all, you may have drawn a prize. A fellow smart enough to come or be sent out on such business, would hardly carry his name and profession printed in plain letters, and— Those are not your guns, Hank?"

"No; I took them from the fellow, first-off, and just happened to fetch 'em along with me to this."

"They look as though they had seen service, and were ready to do still more; let's see 'em a bit, old boy—so!"

"What sort of looking fellow was it you roped, pardner?" asked the other mask.

"Just a plain, common-truck, for looks," came the answer. "Maybe thirty-five, maybe forty. Not far from my bigness. Maybe a bit shorter, and a mite stockier."

"Beard, or smooth-face?"

"Like a parson for that, but he's got a chin and pair of jaws on him such as no Gospel-sharp has any use for, I take it!"

"A fighter, you think?"

"Or he might sue his face for lying, yes!" declared Redmond, positively. "Give him anything like a fair show, and I wouldn't mind risking a stray dollar or two that he'd bother any one man to take the measure of his back in the dust."

"Yet you found it no trouble?"

"Because I didn't give him that show, nor anything like it. Because I make dead sure at the jump-off, and so— Hello, boss!"

He broke off abruptly, for the chief, who had been examining the brace of confiscated pistols, just then gave vent to a fierce ejaculation, at the same time springing to where he could get a clearer light to fall upon the weapons.

"What is it, pardner?" asked the other mask.

"Something carved on these— Take a look and see what you make out of it," his voice husky with poorly-suppressed emotions.

"Letters—a sort of monogram, isn't it?"

"Something that way, maybe, but what letters? What do you make out of them, pardner?"

"I make it R. F., or F. R., but what—"

"What does that stand for? For Richard Fyerbrand—Firebrand Dick, no less!" almost savagely cried the chief, with a fierce gesture.

CHAPTER III.

FRIENDS OR FOEMEN?

JIM JOHNSON raised no further objection against being left in sole charge of the captive, and during the few moments that it took for Hank Redmond to pass beyond their vision, he maintained that guard with hand gripping pistol-butt, and eyes that seemed actually aglow with fierce suspicion.

But the stranger showed no signs of giving trouble along that line, although his head was kept in uneasy motion, and mumbling speech came from his lips.

He seemed wholly unconscious of impending peril to himself, but the heavy shock he had received when jerked from saddle to earth by that choking lasso had apparently shattered his mind, or at least sorely mixed up his wits.

"Shoo!" he thickly mumbled, giving his head a flinching, recoiling shake at the same time. "Go 'way with ye! Don't let— They'll sting me to death, and then— Drive them off, please!"

Johnson chuckled in grim amusement. This human "bee gum" was something to laugh at, instead of being scared at. Redmond was an ass, and he was mighty little better for taking fright at his warning.

Who was the fellow? Why had Hank warned him so earnestly against letting him get away? Why had he been so anxious to capture him, in the first place?

Right there lay the keenest sting of all, for Jim Johnson privately considered himself just as good a man as Hank Redmond, and even better worth a confidential trust.

Yet he was kept in perfect ignorance, while Hank knew it all! He was expected to do the work, while Redmond took the rest!

"Whish-hoo!" Johnson exclaimed, snatching off his hat and flourishing it about the head of his flinching charge. "Scat, ye dug-gun bumbly-bees! Cl'ar out an'— Thar they go, pardner! Clean off, an' they'll never come back ag'in while the big boss is on deck fer to head 'em!"

"Have they— Don't let 'em— Oh, how good that begins to feel!" huskily said the Unknown, at first flinching as he had ever since that whimsical fancy assailed his disordered wits, but then beginning to rally, to finally sit almost erect in the saddle as those imaginary swarms took to flight before that greasy hat.

"An' it's a beginnin' which'll keep on cl'ar through to the stoppin'-place, ye want to know," genially assumed Jimmy, his eyes glowing through the slits cut in his disguise the while. "Jest ketched onto the pizen insex, or I'd 'a' done skooted 'em afore. That is, soon's Hank done racked out. He wouldn't hear to it he fetched the pesky stingers fer to bother ye, I

reckon, 'long of— What'd ye say yer name was, pardner?"

"Name? What was my name when— They're coming back again!"

The stranger flinched as far as his bonds would permit, his face wrinkling with terror.

"Whish-shoo!" cried Johnson, flourishing wildly with his hat, and frightening his own mount into a series of plunges which came near sending him out of the saddle. "Stiddy, dug-gun ye fer a skeery fool hoss!"

And Jimmy again drew close alongside the prisoner.

"'Nough, o'yer pesky foolishin', pardner, an' it's axin' ye ag'in I be: who in time be ye, anyway? What's yer name, an' why was the boss so— Yer name, I'm axin' of ye, critter!"

"Name! Didn't I lose it when— How came I here—like this, too?"

The stranger uttered the final words in stronger tones, and tried to lift his hampered arms, but something of the awkward truth appeared to flash across his brain, and a tinge of color came into his pale face as he found himself helpless to use his own limbs.

"That's all right, pardner," hastily assured Johnson; "we jest hed to clap a hitch on, don't ye see, fer to keep them blamed blumby-bees from swarmin' all over the cabeza of ye—see?"

"What's bees got to do with it? And what's the reason I'm tied up this way, when I never broke law or— And where am I, anyway?"

"Right hyar, 'long of me, pardner," Jimmy hastened to assure, "an' I'm jest waitin' fer to find out which an' who ye be, so's I kin sarve ye all the better; an' so—what's the name o' ye, pardner?"

"Stone, Roland Stone. But, who bound me like this?"

"An' ye jest come 'long Deadwood way, sorter on the loose, like?" persisted the masked man; "wasn't sent by nobody, nur nothin', was ye?"

"I can't, somehow— What's the matter with me, man?" demanded Stone, as he called himself, swaying dizzily in the saddle to which he was securely held by that lariat.

Johnson, bewildered, and hardly knowing just what to do, broke out with:

"Go easy, thar! Durn it, critter, don't make a fool out o' us both! Brace up, consarn ye, man!"

Roland Stone apparently made an effort to do just that, and did draw his body erect, straining at his bonds like one trying to lift hands to throat or to head, while something like fire glowed in his eyes; but, all that seemed part of his strange illness, so Jim Johnson never thought of casting a glance behind himself, in which direction those eyes were gazing.

Even if he had done so, the road-agent would never have sighted what had inspired that glow; for, remaining in sight barely an instant while crossing from one rocky covert to another, a third person was now invisible.

The prisoner, now alive and alert, knowing that rescue was coming, sought to engage the attention of this stupid knave a few moments longer.

"I'm falling!" he mumbled, his muscles seeming to relax and letting him fall helplessly against his bonds. "Don't let— Hold me fast, for— Help, if ye be a man!"

Distinctly were those final words spoken, meant as they were for other ears than Johnson's.

"Augh, quit sech durn foolishin', critter!" the road-agent angrily exploded, yet moving a bit closer.

"I can't; save me, or I'll—ah-h-h!" and his voice died away in a smothered gurgle, his face drooping to the mane of his horse.

Now thoroughly frightened, believing that the prize on which Hank Redmond set such high store, was about to escape them all through death, Johnson forgot all caution in the prospect of coming trouble to himself.

"Don't take it so—git a brace on, cuss ye!" he almost howled, grasping the sinking form, and giving it a frightened shake. "Ef ye don't—"

"I will, old fellow!" came a low but clear voice, and with an agile leap forward, the newcomer fastened a pair of sinewy hands about the neck of the road-agent, tearing him from his saddle and bearing him to earth with a stunning shock!

Swift as thought that drooping figure sprang erect, that husky voice called out in almost vicious accents:

"Choke him! Kill the brute! Don't let him give a single yelp, or it will fetch the rest of the infernal gang down upon us!"

Never a word came in answer from the rescuer, whose attention was entirely devoted to Jimmy Johnson just then and whose strong hands were grinding the road-agent's lips into the ground.

Despite the interest he naturally took in that affair, where he could lend no material aid, the prisoner felt a sting of wondering curiosity as he took note of that oddly-garbed stranger; one whose clothing from neck to ankles was plentifully besprinkled with what appeared to be cut gems, or polished bits of glittering crystals!

This much he was enabled to see, before another decided move was made by the new-comer, who, to silence the ruffian writhing under his

grasp, seized a stone which lay handy, and with two or three heavy strokes on the head, left the man a helpless mass of humanity.

"Don't trust the devil!" cried the bound man, as the stranger was about to arise. "Hit him again!"

"Enough ought to satisfy a hog, old man," retorted the man of jewels, rising to his feet; "I've turned the key in the lock, and by the time he feels like doing any more—"

"Well, friend, haste is the word now!" cried the prisoner, "so cut me free. Those other devils may come back at any moment, and if I'm caught like this— Your knife, man!"

"I thought there was only one other, pardner?" casting a careless glance around as he added: "Where do you reckon he went, anyway?"

"To meet others of the gang, of course! I played silly on them both, but I could only part way fool that tall devil. But, don't wait, pard; cut me free, and then I can talk."

"All right, stranger!" drawlingly spoke the other, but making no actual move that way; on the contrary he turned to the silent Johnson and lifted his mask for a glance into his face.

"Never saw him before that I know of, and he's not pretty enough to make me hanker after—"

"Oh, do cut these infernal coils, pard; don't wait!" urged the bound man on the horse.

"With all the pleasure in life, dear fellow!" repeated the man of crystals, stepping briskly forward and suiting actions to words. "That is what I dogged you so far for."

"So far!" echoed the prisoner, stretching out his arms as the severed rope fell away and left him at liberty.

"From the stage road. Just happened to catch a glimpse of those rascals getting away with your baggage, and so— By the way, might I ask your name? Seems I'd really ought to know you, but—"

"I can't recall your face or form. What shall I call you?" was the retort, without an answer to the other's query.

"Chris Cresson, and sometimes called Cool Chris, the Crystal Sport, through my fancy for— *Augh-gh-h!*"

It was a sound difficult to render in letters, but the mingled cry and grunt was drawn from the Crystal Sport's lips by a strange and dastardly action on the part of the man whom he had so recently set free.

Fist and foot struck Chris Cresson knocking him dizzily backward!

CHAPTER IV.

FIREBRAND DICK, THE DETECTIVE.

As those words came from the masked outlaw leader there in the crater rendezvous, both of his comrades started back, evidently with anything rather than feelings of pleasure.

Hank Redmond made an involuntary snatch at the brace of revolvers, but the holder drew his arm back, turning part way around, then taking another look at the cunningly involved monogram which had caused so much disturbance.

His eyes had not deceived him. There the letters were, distinct enough once they had been picked out from the mass of dexterously executed graving: an R. and an F.

"I can't make anything else out of it, pardner," came his declaration, after that brief pause. "And you really reckon!"

"Wasn't we expecting something of the sort? Didn't our word put us on guard against a human bloodhound? And," his tones growing still more vicious through their very calmness, "where will you find a more thorough-paced bloodhound than this same Firebrand Dick?"

"Who's he, then?" ventured Redmond, unable to longer smother his burning curiosity. "Who's Firebrand Dick?"

Both of the other masks turned quickly his way, with similar ejaculations of mingled surprise and disgust.

"You ask that? Then you don't know him? You never even heard of that devil in human shape, Hank?"

"Never afore you spit his name out, jist now, boss. Is he sech a mighty chief?"

"He's a devil on ten wheels, and don't you let that slip your memory, old man!" grimly declared the leader, once more taking possession of those weapons, and turning toward the light the better to study those tiny letters.

"Well, devil or no, I've got him foul this trip!" declared Redmond. "I wish now I'd fetched him right in here with his guns, but it's only a step or two out to where Jimmy's keeping guard over your devil—on ten wheels, eh?"

"No danger of Johnson's letting him slip, is there?" asked the lesser of the twins. "He's a mighty bad man to hold, I'm thinking!"

"Don't you worry that way, then," was the confident reply. "Jimmy is all eyes open, for I put a flea in his lug before leaving him on duty. He'll hold or kill—one or the other, be sure!"

"I'd take killing for choice!"

"So would I, later on," more calmly asserted the chief, letting the weapons drop to one of the blankets which had supplied them with seats while waiting for the arrival of the one who sent up that smoke-signal. "But before croaking, I'd like a bit of chin-music."

"Reckon you can make him tune up, though?"

"Well, that's doubtful," admitted the leader. "Still, it's worth the time and trouble it may take, and we'll—"

"Shall I fetch him right in here, boss?" asked Redmond, whose curiosity was plainly waxing higher and hotter. "Nobody couldn't hear him yelp, let the critter howl fit to split, and—eh?"

His master was laughing.

"Not so much at you, Hank, as at your words in connection with the Firebrand. *Him squeal!* Why, man, you might skin Richard Fyerbrand from top to toe, an' inch at a time, and all that with a red hot knife, yet I doubt if you could draw a note other than curse or scoff from his lips, through all!"

A strong testimonial, and sounding all the stronger because he who gave it was very chary with his praises toward friend or foe. Yet those who heard him now, knew that the speaker fully believed what he had said.

Redmond lifted his half-mask far enough to give a corner of an eye a gingerly scratch before muttering in comment:

"Then he *must* be a tough nut! And he's the one you was looking for, boss!"

"No, or I'd have given word to shoot at sight, rather than run any long chances. And you two fellows downed him, too!"

"So mighty easy that I'm beginning to think mebbe we've ketched a jackass in a horrowed hide," spoke the road-agent. "He just asked us to snipe him in, boss! Do you reckon he was after us, or the—"

A gloved-hand struck his lips smartly, and the chief harshly cried:

"Name no names, you fool! Don't you know better than to—"

"There's none other within earshot, pardner," expostulated the other mask. Don't punish—"

"No further than I've already punished, pardner," cutting that remonstrance short. "Hank's too good a man to pay off in hotter coin, and yet—you're old enough in the business, Redmond, to know better."

"I wasn't going to call names, boss," doggedly assured the road-agent. "All I meant was to ask—but let it go, then!"

"You wanted to know something more about this human bloodhound, eh?" with a return to his usual calm tones. "Well, that's not hard work. A man has abundance to pick and choose from, when it gets down to talking of Firebrand Dick and his exploits. Eh, mate?"

"Bet your sweet life, pardner!"

"He's a detective, then, boss?" ventured Red-

mond, half-timidly. He had heard just enough to make him thirsty for more information concerning this bloodhound, the bare mention of whose name had the power to blanch the cheeks of that leader, himself a "chief" of no mean note in fighting-land.

And this mighty terror had fallen before his single hand!

"One of the Pinkerton tribe, I take it; at least he was working for them when I made my stamping-grounds in the States, and I've no reason for thinking he's been converted since then."

Hank Redmond laughed softly, suspecting a joke lying back of those words, and by no means averse to playing toady when he saw an opening.

"They keep some mighty good men on their pay-roll, too," commented the other mask, gravely. "But of them all I'd hate most to have this Firebrand Dick on my track—I would that, now!"

"It's a mighty not name, anyway," ventured Redmond. "Sets things on fire, mebbe?"

"You'll think as much if ever he gets loose enough to try to pay off your score," assured the leader. "But, even yet I can't make it seem true! I can't think it's Richard Fyerbrand out here after us!"

"Why not him, as well as another, pardner?"

"No reason at all, only—surely there'd word come in just so many letters, if Firebrand Dick was astir our way?"

"Word *did* come, and—"

"Word to keep all eyes open, but not a hint that Firebrand was on the road. You know it, mate!"

"Yes, but—well, there's one way to settle all doubts, I fancy."

"By going to him, you mean?"

"Surely, yes. Why not?"

"No reason, only—what ought a fellow to do with him, now?"

"Do with him! Look

With a swift leap, that ile shape cov couple of yards, then struck with spurred heel. A small rattlesnake writhed there with head crushed and bleeding as the mask sprung back once more.

A low laugh broke from his lips as he said:

"Not so big nor so terrible to look at, pardner, but chuck full of poison, and certain death if—I'd only given a chance for a bite!"

There was no mistaking that thinly-veiled meaning. And a moment later the masked chief said:

"I reckon you're right, mate. We'd be worse than foolish to wait for a bite, when we've got

a chance to smash the poisonous head. So lead the way, Redmond, and we'll take a squint at this prize of yours before we say more."

With a snap of the fingers to his obedient steed, Redmond turned and left the crater rendezvous by the same intricate passage along which we have watched him thread his way.

He was followed by the other masks, neither of whom appeared to have mounted with them, although it was morally certain they would not journey far through such a wild region on foot.

As he drew near the point from whence his first view could be had of his mate on guard duty, Redmond put finger to lips and sent forth a quavering whistle of warning. No answer came back, but that gave him no uneasiness. His call hardly required a response, and then—

He recoiled with a sharp exclamation of amazement as he caught his first glimpse of— not horses and riders, but a space which was occupied only by a single human figure, and that lying like one dead upon the stones!

"Where is— Tricked, by holy!" cried the chief, whipping forth a revolver as he thrust Redmond aside, then sprang forward, finger on trigger, and flaming eyes roving in quest of his hated and dreaded enemy.

In that single instant he had recognized that prostrate shape as that of Jimmy Johnson, and seeing it lying there, with no horse, no prisoner nigh, the rest was only too readily guessed at.

Once again that tireless bloodhound had broken bonds!

Neither shot nor shout greeted his reckless charge, and that lack quickly convinced the chief that the dreaded detective had surely made good his escape before their coming could be heard by even his keen ears.

"If not, he'd have stopped, though a score of us were coming, tail-on-end!" he averred, almost involuntarily.

"Look!" and with that sharp cry, the lesser mask picked up a piece of braided leather. "A clean cut! Now—who did that much for him?"

"He had help, for that proves it," moodily assented the chief, touching that telltale end of lariat. "Surely Johnson wouldn't— Is he alive, Redmond?"

His eyes passed over to where the taller road-agent was roughly handling his partner, turning him face upward.

That rough handling had its effect, for Jimmy Johnson showed signs of recovering the senses which had been choked out of him by the sinewy fingers of Chris Cresson, and soon, with a groan and gasp, the bewildered ruffian struggled to his seat.

Questions followed, of course, but scanty was the information he could give. He had been taken completely by surprise, and handled so deftly that he had lost his senses without having caught even a single glimpse of his assailant.

Hardly necessary to say, Johnson tried to lessen his fault by lying; swore that at least half a dozen stout, fierce-looking devils jumped upon his back before he could sound an alarm, but he dared not lie far enough to name any particular person as being one of his assailants.

After the first question or two, the mask who had been in company with the chief at the crater, turned away, looking for possible sign, and finding something of the sort so quickly that it seemed little less than a miracle.

The rays of the bright, unclouded sun were reflected from a rather small object lying among the gravel, and with a low exclamation, the mask stooped to pick up—a diamond!

So it would seem, yet a pure gem of that size would have been worth a king's ransom.

Although finely cut and perfectly polished, only a poor judge of precious stones would have mistaken that for a true gem, or other than what it was: a bit of pure crystal, fitted up as a button; which those gloved fingers now held up to common view.

"I found it lying right here! Now—what does it tell you, chief?"

"The Crystal Sport, or the devil himself!" avowed the chief.

"I reckon we'd better look to Chris Cresson for an answer to that query!"

"It was he, then, who set Firebrand Dick free!"

"It certainly looks that way, to a man up a tree," dryly.

CHAPTER V.

CHRIS CRESSON TAKING NOTES.

THOUGHT itself could hardly have acted quicker than did he who had given the name of Roland Stone, when once his determination was fairly formed, and his success was all the more complete because the Crystal Sport certainly was not expecting any such reward for his recent services.

He had drawn closer to the rescued stranger, and was gazing keenly into that face, now looking more its natural self than it had at any time since that lasso-loop had closed about his throat to pluck him headlong out of the saddle.

One hand was lightly resting upon one of

those muscular thighs, and though there was strong curiosity in those dark-brown eyes, even the man on horseback could not accuse them of glowing with enmity.

And yet, with both members acting in perfect concert, there came a fierce kick and a heavy blow, one striking fairly in the stomach, causing the Crystal Sport to bend involuntarily forward, thus lending something of his own weight to the fist-stroke. And that, falling squarely upon a bearded jaw, drove both head and body back again.

Almost lifted from his feet by that double assault, and turned sick by that dastardly kick, Chris Cresson reeled back, to trip and fall at full length, even before his temporarily unnerved hand could close upon the weapon which his fingers instinctively sought.

For once in his life the Crystal Sport was fairly and squarely "knocked out," and, oddly enough, such was his thought while falling.

A brief, anything but graceful scramble there on the stony ground, while the swift clatter of hoof-strokes sounded in his confused ears, then Chris Cresson rallied sufficiently to lift his head and body, one hand supporting his dizzy weight while its mate drew a revolver from scabbard.

His first thought was that the road-agent was coming back, with others in his company, but then, as he failed to see aught of the two horses or the man whose bonds he had cut for such a base award, something of the humiliating truth flashed across his brain, aiding in part to clear away those ugly mists and doubts.

So much was certain: Roland Stone had vanished, taking both animals with him, for those hoof-strokes were receding so rapidly as to be barely distinguishable, even so soon.

"Well, if that isn't gratitude enough for a hog!"

Grimly whimsical that ejaculation sounded, coming as it did from suffering lips which might well have been excused for breathing anathemas instead; but Chris Cresson clumsily rose to his feet, catching his breath painfully as he did so, his unarmed hand pressing tightly against his troubled stomach.

All the same, his bright, keen eyes were at work, sweeping around to take notes of aught else gone wrong; and awkwardly though he moved as yet, let the occasion arise and even a stranger might feel assured that Chris Cresson would not be found lacking, even now.

The treacherously-acting stranger was gone, and, mounted as he was, it would be worse than folly for a footman to think of giving chase, even had the only one there present been capable of making a long and earnest pursuit for revenge.

The road-agent lay as he had been left by those muscular hands; all the change might be summed up in very few words: a faint shivering, which heralded returning consciousness.

Swiftly enough the Crystal Sport made these notes, then turned and flashed a look around at those gray rocks, here piled up in frowning masses, there lying less thickly scattered, with only an occasional spot which could rightly be termed soil.

There was no sound other than those natural to such a region, yet something warned the bold rescuer of coming peril, and once more he acted in obedience to pure instinct, hurrying away from that spot, picking a path through the rocks, an occasional contortion of face or body telling plainly enough how acutely the effects of that ungrateful kick were still being felt.

Cresson had hardly gained the nearest cover, when his still keen sense of hearing warned him to make yet greater haste.

"Horse and man!" he muttered, barely above his breath, at the same time casting a glance in the direction taken by Hank Redmond when leaving their prisoner under Jim Johnson's guard. "Time to lay low, Chris, old man!"

The danger was even nigher than he fancied, else the man of polished glass would never have attempted to scale that rugged pile of rock: rather would he have taken a shorter if less promising route.

Cresson was barely half-way up that pile, when his watchful eyes caught first glimpse of a horse's head as it gave an impatient toss, and knowing that the enemy must be hard by, with eyes ready enough to fasten upon any unusual object, Cool Chris sunk down into the nearest niche, hand on gun, ears bent in listening since his eyes must be denied their natural privilege.

He heard all that followed that coming, and had the grim pleasure of knowing that his own discovery would surely end in murder, unless he could kill before being slain.

He made a note of each name as it was spoken, and tried his best to register each voice, since his eyesight could serve him nothing.

But when that sharp ejaculation broke forth, his curiosity overcame his prudence, and lifting his head just far enough for a look, he had to bite his lips sharply to check the ugly sound that rose in his throat.

Even before a word was spoken the Crystal Sport recognized the danger accident was shaping for him; his eyes at once recognized yonder glittering object.

It looked like a rare, wonderful brilliant, whose value must be almost beyond computa-

tion, since it was fully as large as a grown man's thumb!

"One of my buttons, by all that's miserable!"

His free hand mechanically passed up and down the front of his suit, as though searching for the vacant space where yonder bit of polished stone ought to be; but his eyes and ears were devoted wholly to what was going on below.

An uneasy murmur rose in his throat as the chief caught at the imitation diamond for a closer inspection, and that frown grew still darker when his own name was mentioned.

Although no steps were being taken, as yet, for his detection, thanks to their ignorance of what had actually transpired, Chris Cresson was waxing more and more uneasy the longer he played spy.

"It surely looks like one of his buttons, but—" hesitated the slighter mask, only to have the chief grimly add:

"And surely is what it looks, too! That devil! I never liked him from the very first sight, and now—"

"What?"

"Back to town, of course," with a sudden softening to his tones, but that change hardly came through a softened heart. "Back to meet them both before they can fairly hatch their serpent's setting! We've got two to handle, now!"

"Two?"

"Yes: Firebrand Dick and the Crystal Sport, of course."

"To handle, you say?" still hesitatingly spoke the one who had discovered that unlucky button of crystal.

"To handle, yes! And that means to fix those two devils for a high lot on the hillside!"

Cool Chris drank in all this eagerly enough, although it could hardly be said the hearing was a treat to his ears. Yet it was better to know the worst than to remain in suspense and doubt, surely.

His head ducked swiftly out of sight as he saw one of the masks apparently about to face those rocks, but then he heard Redmond speak:

"Reckon Jimmy's better fixed fer talking straight, boss. Shall I ask him how come it so, then?"

"Did he sight any of the gang, as he calls it? Can't you swear to even one, Johnson?"

"Don't I wish it hard 'nough, boss!" came the whining response. "Ef 'twasn't fer lyin' to ye, wouldn't I say yes in a double hurry? But—wuss luck!—they jest drapped down on top o' me like it mought be comin' from the clouds, an' so I never—hope may die ef I did, sir!"

The chief gave an impatient gesture, then turned his back upon the lesser lights, speaking to his more especial comrade:

"That's all the good we can expect of him, you see! Now, get to our nags, and back to town as sudden as you all know how!"

"And if those two devils keep ahead of us? If they are trying to stir up trouble, even?"

"Kill 'em first, then explain after!"

The ghost of a smile crept into the face of the Crystal Sport as he crouched there in cover, making his ears do double service since any further attempt to take visual notes might easily end in discovery, and that surely meant death to himself or to that trio of knaves.

"Don't come this way, then, my venom-tongued covey!" he muttered, as he silently cocked his pistols for use in case of need. "If you do— Well, I'd hate mightily to end all by killing; yet better that than to be handled *your* fashion!"

No such *contretemps* took place, however, and a few minutes later the Crystal Sport was listening to the fading-away sound of hoof-strokes over that stony trail.

"Gone, and never a trigger pulled!" commented the Crystal Sport, at the same time cautiously working his way along through the rocks, keeping carefully hidden from sight in case any enemy should be upon the alert for some such maneuver. "Wonder what the loyal citizens of Deadwood would say to that, if they only knew? That I was tarred with the same stick, no doubt!"

There was nothing to indicate that watch was being kept by the enemy, but Cool Chris told himself he was not going to increase his difficulties through any lack of ordinary prudence, just then.

"Bad enough to get in over my ears through the fool tricks of another, and that other— Who is he, anyway? Where have I seen that jaw before?"

As though that word reminded him, a hand went up to his own face, gently pressing that thick, chestnut-hued beard, under which lay a dull pain, the results of that ungrateful blow from a hard fist, driven by an unusually muscular arm.

"Smacked my jaw, and threw in a kick for good measure! Wonder if the facetious gentleman will be ready to pay scot when I hand in my bill for damages? Wonder if— Well, I've never kept a man waiting on me longer than I could help, up to date, and I'm not going to begin now!"

Those aching jaws squared themselves a bit

more than usual, and he whom Deadwood knew as Cool Chris Cresson, the Crystal Sport, quickened his pace a bit, having by this time won fairly clear of that patch of rocks.

His keen brown eyes were constantly in motion, roving hither and yon, taking in all objects, ready to send their owner to cover or to a close in case an enemy should be sighted. But none such came in sight, and as he drew further away from the spot where he had risked his own life to give freedom back to an ungrateful stranger, Chris Cresson grew more at ease, and could give his thoughts a wider range.

Although he had only recently made his appearance at the metropolis of the Black Hills, even so soon Chris Cresson had won distinction, if only because he was the most oddly ornamented character to be met with in Deadwood.

From neck to ankles he was garbed in dark-gray corduroy, every seam of which was studded with flashing, glittering stones, all cut in perfect style, and only lacking the peculiar combination of colors to seem diamonds of the first water.

From their countless facets the sunlight was reflected now, making the Sport, at times, an almost painful object to gaze upon, despite his gracefully athletic figure and his really handsome face.

That face was partially masked by a short, crisply curling beard, almost the exact color of his dark-brown eyes, and upon his finely-shaped head rested a cap of otterskin, the tail of which blended with his hair, worn long and curling over his neck.

A frown now rested upon that more than comely face, and muttered words were passed through those lips as Cool Chris hurried along toward the town.

"Devil kick me for chipping when 'twasn't my turn! What matter if they were playing roots on a stranger? What business had I to buck on his side, when—and every step I'm taking already an object of interest to—who?"

"That's the point!" with a short, fierce gesture of a tightly-clinched hand. "Who are they? What they seem, or what my instinct seems to say? My game, or my hurt? And now—have they aught to do with this bit of nasty work?"

It was a considerable distance to Deadwood City, but the Crystal Sport had food for thought sufficient to last him double that distance.

CHAPTER VI.

THE CRYSTAL SPORT.

THE day waned, and night had fallen.

Leisurely crossing the narrow passage-way which divided the dining-room from the office and bar combined, one of the Midland guests cast an indolent glance around while chewing at his toothpick.

There were nearly half a score persons already in the office, and perhaps 'twas nothing but natural for all eyes to turn that way at sound of his coming; and having once gone so far, the marvel was less that all eyes rested upon that glittering, almost gorgeous shape.

Chris Cresson had dressed for the evening before coming down from his chamber to the supper table, and as he was a little later than usual in making an appearance, none of the guests now in the office had caught even a glimpse of him, until this moment.

Like pretty well all of Deadwood, they were used to seeing the oddly-ornamented man of glass, but not one of them all had been given a view such as this; for the Crystal Sport now stood arrayed in a full suit of cream-colored corduroy, free from spot or blemish, soft as velvet itself, and almost as costly.

Like his other suit, this was covered with cut stones, fastened in double rows like buttons, flashing and sparkling in the yellow light of those oil-lamps, making more than one pair of strong eyes wink and blink as they caught that dazzling reflection.

Never before had a shapely yet muscular figure been more perfectly displayed by clothes alone; one could almost trace each swelling muscle and pliant sinew, thick though the imported cloth was.

The Crystal Sport paused, as described, but whether it was to take notes by way of assurance that he had no personal peril to encounter just then and there, or merely as an excuse for permitting an inspection of his glittering make-up, can only be surmised as yet.

Enough, however, that nothing more dangerous than a low murmur of envying admiration was brought forth by that exhibition, at least so long as Cresson remained standing on the threshold.

As he leisurely advanced into the bar-room, one of the more remote figures sprung into motion, pressing toward the Sport, at the same time uttering in strong, yet slightly husky tones:

"Oxcoose me, mein friends! Oxcoose me when I makes me a bassage—und you, mein herr, oxcoose me uff I—glory to Abraham! Is dot so?"

A none too clean hand shot out toward the bosom of the Crystal Sport, and only for his instinctive recoil, those grimy fingers would have

closed about a gem of unusual size and brilliancy.

"Go easy, pardner!" came warningly from those brown-bearded lips, and at the same time Cool Chris put forth a hand which caused the other fellow to stagger a bit as he recoiled. "Finger off, unless you can show cause, for I'm not—"

"Oxcoose me—twice *oaf*, oxcoose me, mein herr!" spluttered the stranger, yet without once removing his gaze from that flashing stone. "I means me no wrong, any dimes. I dinks me—mein Gott! Oxcoose me, but vhas dose—vhas dot *ginooine*, nein?"

A dingy finger made another dive at that flashing ornament, which was hardly brighter than those eyes, shielded though they were by a pair of smoked-glass spectacles.

"Genuine?" echoed the Crystal Sport, with real or finely assumed indignation. "Are you genuine, sir? Of course it's genuine, and precisely what I claim for it: the finest, most perfect stone ever—"

"Mein gott in himmel! Ginooine? Den—dot vhas vorth more as—oxcoose me, I beg you, sir! Ginooine? Und me so—mein Gott! Dot vhas twice *oaf* more bigger as dot Kohinoor tiamondt! Und—*ginooine*!"

"Yes, sir, genuine—crystal!" sternly repeated the Sport, with a malicious twinkle in his brown eyes as he made the addition. "And as I never laid further claim for my pretty pets, of course they are genuine from top to bottom."

"Grystal? Ginooine? Dose tiamondts vhas—oh, mein cracious! Giff me a shake by an arm, somepody—kevick!"

"Anything to keep peace in the family, pardner," laughingly cried the fun-loving Sport, at the same time catching the bewildered Jew or German in his arms, whirling him in a dizzy "bear-waltz," as he added:

"Shake your feet, Sheeny! Shake 'em until your toe-nails rattle, and your too-powerful accent begins to drop off, for other hoofs to stumble over! Shake, or be done shuck, then!"

Those more sluggish limbs seemed unable to keep pace with that mad gyration, and at the same time support the weight of that rather bulky body belonging to them. And so, even as the little group of guests were laughingly making way for that ludicrous exhibition, legs gave way, and that so suddenly Chris Cresson could save himself from sharing that fall only by abruptly breaking hold.

"Well, well, if you haven't dropped something, pardner, I wouldn't say so!" half reproachfully cried the Sport, as he brought up against the sleeve-polished bar, back to the wood, fingers clasped lightly in front of his swelling chest, thumbs twiddling indolently as his amused eyes watched the movements of the stranger.

That stranger was something past middle age, to judge from his time-frosted hair and full beard, to say nothing of his rather clumsy figure, with its bowed shoulders, almost sufficiently so to be termed a deformity.

But if well along in years, the fellow showed himself reasonably active in picking himself up, and more than usually good-humored, since he frankly joined in the laugh which welcomed his downfall.

"Dot vhas goot choke on me, aind't it?" he chuckled, the sentence broken by an asthmatic gasp or two. "Vhas pooty slow by bickling dose chokes out, maybe, but nopody has dose right to say I takes me no dumble to it—nein?"

"And I'm ashamed of my part in the trick, pardner," frankly said Cresson, stepping forward with extended hand. "Shake? If not, I'll surely have to think you still hold a grudge, man!"

"I shake—but easy—more easy as you shake me dot *odder* dime, uff you please!" bowed the German, with a touch of grim humor. "Und now I makes me meiself known—so!"

With a deep bow he presented a card, on which the Crystal Sport had no difficulty in making out the letters:

"MORRIS ROSENBLATT, Diamond dealer."

"And you took my poor gauds as the pure quill, did you?" asked the Sport, with a smile which contained a trace of contempt. "Well, if you follow the same manner of judging stones—"

"Only dot," with a gingerly poke of a forefinger toward that gleaming stone. "I makes me mein eyes all dizzy mit dose sparkle-all-*oaf*, und so—I see me now, blenty blain, dot vhas schust *grystal*, sure!"

"Or I'd never be displaying it in Deadwood, be sure," curtly commented the Crystal Sport, slipping that card into a pocket, then passing through the front door to the dimly illuminated street.

No one cared to follow him, either for a more extended view of his gorgeous garb, or to press upon him company which he had not asked for. Although Chris Cresson had shown nothing but good nature during his brief stay at Deadwood, only a novice in the art of reading human nature would make the mistake of crowding in upon him uninvited.

Without showing any signs indicating haste,

Chris Cresson cut very little time to waste, but strode along like one who has his destination fairly in view; and so the Sport had.

A glaring red light caught his eyes down the main street, and quickening his steps a little, another minute saw him pausing at the threshold of Deadwood's then most popular "sporting place," or saloon and gambling hell combined.

This was the "Empire," and both saloon and those who ran it in connection with a "game, limit off," were known by every man inside the boundaries of the Black Hills.

Both money and fairly good taste had been lavished upon the Empire with the usual result: both roughs and gentlemen were attracted thither, some to drink, others to play, but all to give their share of admiration to the being upon whose beautiful face and superb figure Chris Cresson was even now gazing, his eyes all aglow, his breath slightly quickened.

That gaze was of brief duration, for those brilliant black eyes let very little escape them, and Josephine St. John, or "the Empress" as she was usually called, no doubt after the saloon title, caught sight of the curiously ornamented Sport, and with a gesture visible to his eyes alone, bade him draw nearer the easy-chair in which she was luxuriously reclining, cigarette daintily held by her rosy-tipped fingers.

Not a sound followed that quick advance, for the floor was carpeted with a rich tapestry, thick and sound-killing as velvet, and forming a strong contrast to those coarse, cowhide boots which the majority of all present wore.

A rough, uncouth crowd was ranged along the bar, some emptying their glasses, others oddly smirking at their own reflections in the great mirror back of the barrier; and the ugliest of all were the least impatient for the coming of the drinks for which they had called, too!

Close to where the Empress was reclining, stood a square card-table at which one man only was seated: the dark, foreign-looking proprietor who was familiarly known as "Frenchy Frank" Mitchell.

He was toying with a pack of satin-finish, gilt-edged cards, and his lids seemed lazily heavy as he glanced up at the Crystal Sport's coming, barely long enough for a brief nod of recognition.

But Chris Cresson met with a very different reception from the Empress, who rose erect in her seat, her smile gradually growing more pronounced and brighter as her black eyes passed slowly up and down that athletic shape.

Readily falling in with her apparent humor, Chris Cresson slowly turned himself about upon his heels, like one on inspection, never cracking so much as a smile, until the St. John musically murmured:

"And 'tis really you, Christopher? Do you know, my boy, I've actually been flattering myself that you would follow my friendly advice?"

"As to what, may I ask, Empress?"

"Altering your style of dress, of course," with a barely perceptible touch of irritation entering her tones.

"Then you really don't approve of my taste!" asked Cresson, passing a hand over cloth and buttons, his own lips smiling approval, whatever else might prove lacking.

"Approve?" echoed Josephine, leaning forward a bit, and tapping his arm with her beringed hand. "How can I approve, my lad? When I see you the center of—is it admiration, then?"

"Isn't it—or envy?" coolly asked the Sport, in turn.

"You know better, Cresson! You know these glaring bits of glass are covering you with ridicule, covert if not yet openly. But that will come in time; a man can't invite ridicule, and yet escape it!"

"Just so it does not issue from your red lips, Empress, I can—"

An impatient gesture cut him short, then Josephine added, more gently, with more than ordinary feeling in her musical tones:

"Why do I take so much trouble, do you ask yourself, Mr. Cresson? I will tell you, once for all: because I hold you as far too good a man to needlessly invite such harsh criticisms."

"A compliment for which I heartily thank you, Empress," in like modulated tones. "If any person's wishes could prevail, be sure yours would come on top. And yet—if I till cling to this rig-out, you'll both think and call me a fool, no doubt?"

"Well, perhaps not quite *that* bad," with a half-smile, "but I certainly will give you my pity, that folly should so mislead a good man!"

Chris Cresson bent a bit lower, to bring his eyes squarely before her sparkling orbs, then softly whispered:

"Now I can tell you why I cling to this garb, Josephine! Your pity will be mine, you say? And haven't you heard what sentiment pity is akin to? Shall I spell that word right out, Empress?"

A swift flush shot over that more than fair face, and those long-lashed lids as quickly veiled those lustrous balls; but the St. John was not a woman to long remain off guard, and when her eyes met his, not a trace of embarrassment or emotion remained for his reading.

"Love, you mean, of course, but that's—played out, long ago. And I simply say it all over: I'm

sorry you will persist in setting yourself up for less worthy men to make a jest over."

"I've never heard those jests, Empress."

"You ought to see them, then, unless you are willfully blind to the truth which is plain enough—for instance, then!" with a slight nod of head and turn of eyes toward the front door, through which a group of rough-clad, well-armed men had pushed a brief space before.

"Look to the front, please! See how those tough cases are staring at you. And for why? Because they take you for a holy circus, of course!"

Chris Cresson sent his glance that way as requested, and the next instant his right hand smoothly moved back until it rested close to the butt of a revolver at his hip. For there, foremost in that group of armed men, he recognized the face of Jimmy Johnson, the road-agent whom he had treated so unceremoniously that same afternoon!

CHAPTER VII.

MISCHIEF IN THE AIR.

THERE was no room for doubt.

Cool Chris Cresson knew that he saw before him the very man whose face he had exposed to the light of the sun, and whose throat even yet must be smarting from the vigorous choking it had received from those muscular fingers.

His name had been mentioned more times than one during the minutes following that discovery, and it was now close to the tongue of the Crystal Sport as he cast a careless glance that way.

"A pack of sweet-scented ducks, don't you fancy, Empress?" he drawlingly commented, a moment later. "They hardly ornament the Empire, to say the least of it."

"See how they are watching you, man!" came in barely audible notes. "Are you eager to attract such attention, then?"

"The sour with the sweet, and still I'm ahead of the game," daringly whispered the Sport, bending a bit lower, yet without materially altering his position, or entirely losing sight of those grimly forbidding faces near the door. "So long as you are—may I say it?"

"En garde!"

Cool Chris could not be certain from just which pair of lips that sibilant whisper came, but if not from Josephine, then from Frenchy Frank Mitchell, though a swift glance showed him still manipulating the cards for his own amusement, and seemingly lost to all else.

Certain it is that he had not cast a look around since that little squad of rough-clad fellows put in an appearance.

Careless though he was in outward seeming, Chris Cresson had never been more completely alert in all his life. The instant he recognized the road-agent whom he had robbed of his human prey, the Crystal Sport felt morally certain that mischief was brewing, and that he would have to do battle for his life before that evening was spent.

There was an even half-dozen in the gang, and while he could identify but one, or Jim Johnson, whose half-mask he had lifted after choking him to insensibility, was it not natural to believe the others were tarred with the same stick?

Empress Josephine made no answer to that audacious whisper, but as she veiled her fair face with a cloud of scented smoke, the Crystal Sport again caught her low tones, saying:

"Look—closer, man!"

"I see them, but—what of it?" asked Cresson, giving the gang a cool, leisurely glance, then sinking his eyes to that fair face as he asked the question.

"Can you ask, man?" with a touch of irritation entering her tones, and a more vivid flash filling her black eyes as they lifted to meet his gaze. "What was it I set out to say? That you had far better resemble those toughs, yonder, outwardly at least, than to court attention such as your ridiculous garb invites! Unless—"

"And 'unless,' Empress?"

Those gleaming orbs searched his face for a few moments as though their owner hoped to read what might lie back of that imperturbable mask, but in vain. If Chris Cresson held any secrets there, he knew right well how to guard them.

A white, slender-fingered hand lifted to touch his sleeve as his left hand rested easily upon the cushioned arm of her easy-chair. Those brilliant black eyes claimed his in turn, and while holding them thus by a woman's power the Empress slowly added, in low, significant tones:

"Unless you have a secret purpose in playing such a role, Chris Cresson! Am I right? Have I hit the mark when I believe you are playing a cunning part for some important end?"

Questions so couched call for specific answers, but the Crystal Sport was spared the necessity of replying at all, for just then the trouble came!

Stepping quickly forward from his mates, one of the recently arrived gang drew near that easy-chair, and as though through clumsy blundering, planted a heavy cowhide boot

squarely on Cresson's foot, even as he lurched heavily against that oddly-garbed figure while stooping over the reclining Empress to coarsely utter:

"Hellow, sweetness! Give us a hug an' a smack, for old time rocks!"

A grimy forefinger thrust out as though to chuck the woman under her chin, but if such was his intention, the two never made connection.

Swift as thought the Crystal Sport drew that ready hand back a few inches further, then sent it forward and upward, striking the ruffian squarely under the jaw, actually lifting him clear of the floor, then toppling him over like a falling tree!

It was a magnificent stroke, and one into which the Crystal Sport flung weight, muscle and hearty good will, for he knew an insult was aimed at himself, far more than at the Empress.

The instant his stroke was delivered, Cresson sprung back a pace, both hands flying to a level with his chest, and each set of fingers gripping the butt of a cocked revolver.

"Steady, you ducks!" rung forth his clear tones in additional warning as those grim muzzles swiftly covered the little squad near the entrance. "Chip without showing good cause, and some of you'll drop heap sight harder than this clumsy mate of yours!"

"A dirty foul!" angrily cried the fellow Cresson had recognized as Jimmy Johnson.

"You gave him no show, curse you!" harshly said another, stepping to the front as one accustomed to take the lead might have done. "What made you hit—"

"Down him! Look at Hank—killed, or—"

An uproar now broke forth from the crowd, something of the truth having just made its way through their liquor-thickened wits; and not knowing from what quarter the next blow might come, Chris Cresson swiftly leaped back and aside, bringing his back conveniently close to the solid wall, thus guarding against a treacherous assault from the rear.

All was confusion now, but those few seconds had given those more deeply interested time for decision, and that advantage promised good results.

Chris Cresson had not stopped to see just who the rude knave was, although he had taken it for granted Jimmy Johnson would be most likely to take the initiative; but even as he dealt that blow, he saw his mistake, and knew he was striking a complete stranger, or else one of the two tall fellows whose masks and heavy beards had foiled his curious scrutiny there among the rocks.

Raised off his feet by that blow, the ruffian fell heavily against a corner of Mitchell's card-table, then rolled off to the carpeted floor.

The cards scattered like falling leaves as Frenchy Frank sprang to his feet, hands arming themselves on the instant, his dark eyes glowing redly as they flashed around to take in the situation.

Then came those angry cries, and close upon them that incipient rush; a movement which might mean so much unless promptly checked by one with sufficient authority.

That one was the swarthy-faced proprietor, and as his glittering guns came to view, his sharp tones rung forth:

"Steady, gents! No rowing under this roof, or I'll handle the red paint-brush my own self! Steady—and quiet!"

"He downed pore Hank, an'—"

"I'll down you to balance the scales, unless you simmer," coldly interposed the gambler, turning a muzzle squarely upon Jimmy Johnson. "You all know the Empire rules, gents: peace and good order, if we have to fight for it!"

"And yonder drunken brute got far less than he deserved!" just then came the cold, almost harsh tones of Empress Josephine. "Mr. Cresson was right in knocking him down, though I almost wish his hand had been less swift; I meant to have killed the cur—like a dog, too!"

In her white right hand there showed a silver-mounted, pearl-handled revolver, and this looked none the less effective because a little curl of scented vapor was rising from the cigarette those white teeth had closed upon.

Such cool nerve in a woman was just the thing to draw forth a cheer from these rough yet gallant diggers, and that substantial roof fairly quivered as the cheers came on time!

"That's all right," doggedly uttered one of that little squad, not only holding his ground, but showing signs of advancing. "Maybe Hank was a bit too fresh, so to speak, but that don't excuse a dirty cur from hitting him unbeknown, like—"

"I hit him, just as I'd hit you, for planting his toad-masher on my foot with malice prepense," coolly called forth the Crystal Sport.

"He never—you took him foul, and I'll—"

"Stand back, I say, Barney Watkins!" cried Frenchy Frank, leaping in between those two men with ready pistols, to add in deadly tones:

"Halt, I say! If there's any shooting to be done in the Empire, I'm the man to pull triggers—and when I do that, I'm drawing to fill a graveyard, too!"

"There's other places, I reckon," surlily growled Watkins, yet without flinching in the slightest from those ugly muzzles.

"And in those places you can fight it out to suit your sweet selves, for all of me," instantly cried Mitchell. "Go outside—anywhere, just so you're on the right side of my limit. But—I do what shooting and cutting the Empire needs, bear in mind, all!"

"And what Frank lacks, I'm on deck to supply, gentlemen," coldly supplemented the Empress. "Talk enough. After this 'twill be action!"

Barney Watkins scowlingly gazed at one and then at the other face, reluctant to even seem to back away, yet knowing how powerless he was to advance further. And then, luckily, it seemed, a diversion was caused by Hank Redmond himself.

That blow had been sufficient to almost kill any ordinary man, but the road-agent was of unusual toughness, and had not entirely lost his senses even for an instant, though pretty thoroughly "knocked out."

Now he scrambled dizzily to his feet, cursing savagely, though in tones so thick he could hardly have interpreted those sounds himself.

But his meaning was sufficiently clear when he fumbled for a gun, his other hand brushing the tangled hair out of his eyes as he glared around in quest of the Crystal Sport.

"Whar is he? Stand him up afore me, and I'll bloody murder the cur that tried to— Whar is he then?"

"Right this way, my howling cyclone of fur and fury," coolly answered the Crystal Sport. "Steady, burro! Careful, or you'll take another tumble all over yourself, Johnny Raw!"

"Cuss ye! You tuck me behind—you hit me foul, and—"

"You lie in saying so," sharply cut in Chris Cresson, stepping forward with cool deliberation while adding: "You led for a row, and you got it. Only, you made a mistake in insulting a lady, for then I just had to lend you a poulitice—see!"

For the first time since the row began, Empress Josephine left her easy-chair, and thrusting the muzzle of her pistol almost against the tanned face of Hank Redmond, she coldly, sternly cried:

"You mangy cur! I ought to shoot you like the hound you surely are! And—I will so serve you, too, if ever you dare act that way toward me again!"

Redmond never flinched, though that muzzle was fairly touching the skin of his face, just then. And it was with a touch of native dignity hardly to be expected in one of his looks, that he slowly made reply:

"You're a lady, ma'am, and that bars me from talking back—to you! But as for yonder dandy devil-dude—I'll kill him, or he's got to down me for keeps!"

His empty left hand rose to point his meaning more clearly, and the general interest was by no means lessened as a smile broadened upon the face of the Crystal Sport just then.

Cresson took a leisurely step forward, but before he could utter the words his brain was shaping, Frenchy Frank chipped again, his tones icy cold, his manner all the more dangerous because so calm.

"That's all right, Mr. Redmond. You can fight it out to suit your own sweet selves, but not inside these four walls. We have our rules and regulations, and if they are unknown to you, it's not my fault."

"I know, Frenchy, but—"

"I'm not arguing the case, Mr. Redmond. I'm making a simple statement of well-known facts. I do the fighting for this establishment, and if you insist on having a circus—"

"Not with you, sir, but that cussed dude—I'll kill him, or he'll make cold meat out o' me!"

"All right, I say, but not in the Empire. Step outside and settle it according to taste. I've said my say, now—play or pay!"

Hank Redmond flashed another ugly glare at Cresson, then cried:

"You take it in, critter? I'm ready, be you?"

"Oh, I'm always ready," came the careless reply. "In fact, Billy Blowhard, I was born just that way!"

"Then come an' see me, you devil's dude!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"PURTY PIZEN, THE JAW-SMITH."

AS soon as Hank Redmond had shown himself capable of talking if not of acting for himself, the rough-clad, coarse-bearded fellow whom Frenchy Frank had addressed as Barney Watkins, fell back a bit, keeping silence, yet holding himself in readiness for backing up his comrade in case hostilities should culminate in actual warfare.

But now, apparently realizing how poorly fitted the tall rascal was for coping with that cool, keen, steel-nerved Sport just then, Watkins pushed forward and gripped Redmond by an arm, gruffly speaking:

"Fighting goes, but it's got to be on a level. Come, pardner; we've got to have a bit of chinning before burning powder, I reckon."

"Taking water, so quick!" cried a scoffing

voice from somewhere among the crowd, its owner doubtless fearing the loss of an amusing spectacle—to the lookers-on!

"You lie, whoever says it!" harshly challenged Watkins, hand on gun as he glared around the brilliantly lighted room. "Come outside, and I'll make you eat those words my own poor self, then!"

"Order, gentlemen all!" rung forth the clear tones of Empress Jo. "Is this a bear-garden to-night, I'd like to know?"

During this bit of an interlude, Chris Cresson was watching and waiting with apparent carelessness, although his partly veiled eyes suffered precious little of any importance to escape them.

Yet he gave a slight start and gripped his pistol-butt more tightly as a hand tapped him on the shoulder from behind. He had heard no sound from that direction, and until that instant had believed his rear perfectly protected.

"On guard, pardner!" came a low whisper so nigh that he felt the warm breath stir his beard slightly. "They mean to double-bank you, sure as fate and Doctor—"

"Who are you, then?" coldly asked the Crystal Sport, turning part way around, and stepping slightly back and aside at the same instant.

"Mighty little for looks, but good enough—B ttle it up, man!"

Swiftly, almost hissing came those final words, drawn forth by the flash of startled recognition which came into the eyes of the Crystal Sport. And yet—as he had said, this stranger was not much for looks, if good-looks were understood.

There were many dirty, greasy, ragged diggers present that night, as was the case every night since the Empire first "opened up," but surely it would have been no easy matter to pick out another man there who bore such a disreputable, "down on his luck" appearance as the fellow Chris Cresson confronted just then.

His garb was that of a prospector, or a day-laborer in the mines. His coarse overalls, his boots, his shirt, his hat even, showed holes that were only outworned by grease-spots and rudely-stitched patches.

Coarse hair was visible through rents in that greasy, bandless felt tile, and a still more bristling beard surrounding that face, only the nose and eyes of which were open to curious inspection.

Only one of that countless horde which the wealth of the Black Hills had brought to Deadwood, and yet—Chris Cresson knew better!

Incredible though it seemed, startling though the alteration was, he knew this seeming digger in hard luck was none other than the man whom he had so generously risked his own life to save from the grip of those human vultures!

"You know me, just as I meant you should," swiftly whispered the stranger, glancing around with seeming carelessness, and never a hair of his beard stirring as he added: "I know you, now, if I didn't then. I'll explain all, later, but for now—pick me as your second when the fight is on!"

A cool brain can work with marvelous rapidity when the need arises, and just then Chris Cresson was busy with thought. He half divined the truth, as his memory recalled certain words let fall by the masked road-agents out in the hills that afternoon, and when the stranger ceased murmuring, his decision was made.

"All right, and it's a bargain. Watch the right time, then come up as a stranger."

Turning away, without even a glance toward that disguised face, the Crystal Sport moved back to his former position beside the easy-chair, now once more occupied by Empress Josephine.

The woman greeted him with eyes rather than voice, and Chris Cresson flushed slightly as he caught that radiant glow.

"You hardly expected an illustration so soon, I fancy, Mr. Cresson?" her words came musically, yet almost sadly. "Only for your unfortunate taste for the whimsical and—"

"I would have lost the chance of avenging you, Empress."

"I could and would have done that myself, and never—"

"I know," at the same time gently touching that white hand as it rested lightly on the cushioned arm of her chair. "But I'd rather kill a round score of such mangy curs, than to have this hand—so small, so shapely, so beautiful!"

"Compliments, sir?" with a faint smile which was almost instantly hidden behind a veil of cigarette smoke.

"The truth is not a compliment, Empress, and this little hand—ugh!" with a slight shiver, either real or admirably counterfeited. "It ought by rights to know nothing harsher than kisses, nothing less—"

That blue veil parted before a scented breath, and afforded just a glimpse of a yawn, then Empress Jo hid that pearl-rimmed cavity with one of the charming hands the sentimental Sport was apostrophizing.

Above that hand glittered a pair of laughing eyes as Chris Cresson recoiled a bit in blushing confusion. And in a languorous murmur came the bit of slang:

"Ah, you make me tired, Cressy!"

Before the Sport could rally and return to the attack, the door was rudely driven back upon its hinges, to give admittance to the burly figure of Barney Watkins.

Back of his broad shoulders showed several hairy faces, which were easily recognized as belonging to the little gang of which Hank Redmond and Jimmy Johnson formed members.

Neither of those worthies was visible just then, and after a quick look around over the crowd, Barney Watkins recognized the Crystal Sport, and immediately strode in that direction.

Not a word was spoken during that brief walk, for all eyes were fixed upon the newcomer, and every one then present felt fully assured Watkins had returned for the express purpose of forcing a duel upon the Crystal Sport.

"My man's ready and waiting, sir," Barney Watkins said, making a stiff little bow toward the smiling fellow who stood at ease beside Empress Jo. "If you're not a coward—"

"Shall I give you proof to the contrary, sir?" smilingly asked Chris Cresson, stepping forward with thumb and finger in readiness. "A coward would hardly dare—this!"

Swift as thought his grip closed upon that prominent nose, giving it a twist and a wrench so forcible that, stout knave though he undoubtedly was, Barney Watkins doubled up and gave a muffled howl of agony!

Just as swiftly did the Sport drop his hold and step back, hand on his hip once more, ready to draw and fire in case the fellow should attempt to catch the drop himself.

"That blots out your coward, pardner," coldly said Cresson, "and now I'm ready to hear the rest of your message."

"I'll drain your heart dry for this, curse you!" hoarsely cried the fellow, his nose streaming blood, but his hands making no move toward his guns. "I never—"

"Well, I did for you, then, pardner, and I'll do even worse the next time you address a gentleman as though you were merely talking to your own reflection in the glass."

"Whoop-up an' whoop-over!" cried a coarse voice just then, and with a clumsy caper, that ragged, greasy, disreputable figure came to the front and made a dive for the hand of the Crystal Sport, shaking it vigorously while adding: "Done it slicker'n I mought, Jim-josey, an' ef the molds hedn't bin bu'sted jist at my hatchin', billy-be-jo-hammered ef I wouldn't take my solemn davy you's my own twin brother tornded a year or so later on—so I would, now!"

"Well, I hardly see the resemblance, save in good looks," smilingly answered the Sport.

"An' my man's waiting for—will you fight him, you devil?" rudely interposed Barney Watkins.

"Will he? Will he fight 'im?" roared the nondescript, as he whirled that way with a snort of contempt and angry scorn at such a base and baseless insinuation.

"Who're you, critter? Git out of my road, or I'll—"

"Steady, gents!" once more warned Frenchy Frank. "Talk all you like, but no fighting, under penalty, remember."

"Who'm I, is it?" asked the stranger, striking an attitude, and looking down his reddened nose at the impudent questioner, his own face almost entirely hidden by the limp brim of his greasy hat. "An' this to me? This to the one an' only Purty P'izen, the Jaw-smith! This to— I say, pardner," turning toward Chris Cresson and lowering his voice to a coaxing, wheedling pitch, "jest choose me fer your backer in this yer' bit of a shindy, an' then—don't ye see?"

"Don't I see what?"

"Don't ye see that while you're moppin' the airth up with that mangy woman-sulter, I kin be battin' the moon with yender p'izen critter fer a bat—see?"

Chris Cresson laughed a bit, just as he would have done had he not been anticipating some such request, and other voices joined him.

Barney Watkins seemed stung to the very quick by those sounds, and he took a long step toward that tall figure, which seemed perfectly willing to meet such an advance, too.

But once again Frenchy Frank chipped, to the point.

"I'm beginning to grow tired saying it all over so often, gentlemen, and when I do get that way—well, enough is enough, and you ought to know it without furt'er telling."

"I've no pointed objections to you gents talking in here, so long as you keep within decent bounds; but you're crowding the limit too close for comfort, and so I tell you this:

"If you really mean fighting, fall to work and get the preliminaries over with. On the contrary, if it's only wind—and none too sweet at that—rack out of this for some other place where your fuss will cause less annoyance to decent people."

"I'm all business, and I've come here to ask you, sir, will you meet the men you—"

"Augh, looky hyar, I ask ye!" indignantly spluttered the fellow who had given his name and title as Purty P'izen, the Jaw-smith, making a wild flourish with his clinched fist as he cut that labored speech short.

"Who're you, then?"

"Purty P'izen, the Jaw-smith, an' I'm doin' ther chin-music for Glimmer-glass, hyar—which is what, dug-gun ye, critter!"

Frenchy Frank stepped forward and gazed keenly, suspiciously into that anything but clean visage for a few seconds, then turned upon the Crystal Sport to ask:

"Who is this fellow, Mr. Cresson?"

"You surely heard him blow his bazoo, pardner?" laughingly answered the adventurer, with a careless wave of the hand by way of further introduction. "Know each other, gents. Mr. Frenchy Frank, Purty P'izen, Esq."

"The Jaw-smith, both o' ye," with a clumsy duck of his head and backward scrape with a foot. "Which that's the main part o' the firm, ef ye only knowed it, and ef ye don't, why jest let me—"

"And you agree to his serving you as second, Mr. Cresson?" asked the gambler, in tones of undisguised amazement.

"Why not?" with a shrug of his shoulders. "It's only a form, after all, for I'll lay that cur out so cold there'll be no room left for question or dispute."

"See that Redmond don't turn your toes up, first!"

"An' you cornfind yer chin-music right this yer' way, critter, or fu'st ye know ye won't know ary dug-gun thing! An' now—that fool' pard o' yours wants to ketch more yit, does he?"

"He wants to play even with the fellow who hit him from under cover, yes," gruffly asserted and amended the other.

"That's 'nother lie you've done hatched, critter, an' ef ye keep on a-doin' of it some more, durned ef I don't make yeswaller p'izen by the quart!" indignantly cried the Jaw-smith.

"Enough talk, both of you fellows," coldly interposed Chris Cresson. "I'll give your friend all the satisfaction he wishes, only name the style he'd rather take his last medicine in, please."

"My man's outside, with a gun in his fist, waiting for his get-even, then," bluntly declared Watkins. "You say you're not a coward; prove it by stepping outside yonder door, to fight on equal footing!"

"With all the pleasure in life, my dear fellow!" assented the Sport.

CHAPTER IX.

MARKING HIS MAN.

WITH a step as careless as his tone, the Crystal Sport was moving toward the door, but his self-appointed second promptly interfered, crying out in real feigned indignation:

"Whoa-ap! R'ar back an' come to a halt, the whuil dug-gun shootin' match of ye!"

"What's the matter with you, now?"

"Tain't so mighty much me, now, as it mought be my pard, Glimmer-glass, then," declared Purty P'izen with a portentous scowl at the angry Watkins, then giving a knowing nod toward the street as he added: "Reckon we're all two both on us clean cracked an' done gone crazy! Reckon we're gwine to prance right out yender 'thout ary kiver nur s'curity as how that p'izen pard o' yourn hain't a-layin' right thar for to catch snap-jedgment onto Glimmer-glass, hyar! Augh, what sort o' blind kittens do ye take us fer, arhyow!"

Purty P'izen rattled off this string of verbal pearls so rapidly that even Barney Watkins was unable to slip in a word edgewise, although his face was fairly glowing with honest indignation: or what looked like it.

Chris Cresson paused at that first command, smiling a bit as he listened to the argument offered by this strange customer whose life-path seemingly had begun to blend closely with his own; but it was more through a malicious pleasure in seeing Barney Watkins chafe under such an ugly suspicion than because he really put faith in such foul play.

"You don't take no stock in such— Tell him he's a cussed fool fer even thinking that way, Cresson!"

Watkins made this fiercely subdued appeal to the Crystal Sport, but Cresson was perfectly willing to give his second full swing, and coldly showed as much, by saying:

"I'm in the hands of my friend, here. Complete your arrangements with him, if you please, Mr. Watkins."

"Whooray fer me, which means we, us an' comp'ny!" cried Purty P'izen, with a stamp of his foot and a snort copied after that of a startled mustang on the range. "An' now you've ketched the cairb, critter, gee along straight as a string, or dug-gun ef I don't climb into the saddle my own self!"

"I'll talk to you on that point later, sir," coldly menaced the other, then speaking rapidly: "Say how you want the affair to open up. My man's waiting out yonder all this lonesome time!"

Having once asserted his authority and upheld the dignity of the office he had so coolly assumed, Purty P'izen showed himself amenable to reason, and while he stubbornly held out against everything which could possibly throw the advantage against his principal, it did not take very long to reach an amicable understanding, so far as the seconds were concerned.

This done, Barney Watkins passed outside to

post his principal, while Purty P'izen took occasion to enlighten the Crystal Sport.

"Talk it out so all can hear," said Cresson, as the curious crowd began to press around. "The more witnesses the better, I take it."

"Which is what, ef I do say it my own purty self," modestly declared the Jaw-smith, giving his greasy hat a flourish as he jerked it off and glanced around with a fascinating smile. "An' righthyar ye hev the sweet meat, gents, ready picked out for yer grinders, too!"

"Guns—twenty paces—outside in street—wait fer word, then git thar Eli!"

So crisp an explanation was hardly to be looked for in a fellow who had shown himself so fond of hearing his own melodious voice, and the very contrast probably had something to do with the cheers which greeted that announcement.

Purty P'izen promptly took it all for a compliment to himself, and once again that dilapidated tile cut a flourish through the air, and his shaggy head went bowing toward all points of the compass as rapidly as his neck could pivot.

"Ye do me proud, gents, an' *you*, gelorious madam of the starry eyes! Ef I hed so many dukes, I'd more'n love to shake the lot o' ye, but sence them as couldn't ketch a' airly turn mought git up onto thar ears with hot indig', why—shake I'm shakin', an' each one o' ye kin play you're the chosen critter picked out fu'st—see?"

The Jaw-smith gripped his own paws, shaking and grinning blandly.

Empress Josephine laughed softly as she leaned back in her chair, gazing at that oddity through long-lashed lids that nearly concealed those starry orbs so adroitly rung in by Purty P'izen.

That hard-favored worthy seemed more than favorably impressed by her charms, and it was with an audible smack of his densely bearded lips that he turned toward the Crystal Sport, huskily whispering:

"Finest chunk of a heifer I ever *did* glimpse, pardner! Ef *you* hain't got no cinch thar, mebbe a galoot of *my* size an' giner'l 'pearance mought try fer to paw sod that way—eh?"

"Lower, you fool!" sternly muttered Cresson, his own face flushing more hotly than that of the Empress as he shot an apprehensive glance her way.

He could not doubt that the St. John had caught that incautious whisper, for her cheeks showed a more brilliant color than usual, and one white hand was lifted to touch the gilt and jeweled dagger which was thrust through her thick coils of raven-black hair.

"Get outside, man, unless you want to taste cold steel!" sternly whispered the Crystal Sport, at the same time pushing Purty P'izen toward the door. "She heard you, and—"

"Axin' pardon ef I'm tromplin' over your private range, boss, but, as I said afore, never yit did the two eyes o' me—"

"Bite it off, or you'll have a worse brush to handle than I've got on the string," again interrupted Cresson.

This time Purty P'izen took the hint so bluntly administered, and without further remarks he plunged eagerly into the business on hand.

Whatever might have been their intentions had the Crystal Sport recklessly accepted that informal invitation to step forth into the street, no attempt at foul play was made now that such had been so bluntly charged by the Jaw-smith.

Hank Redmond was standing in the middle of the street, here quite brilliantly illuminated by the flood of light streaming through the open door and wide windows of the Empire, to say nothing of the clear moon and starlight.

Even as they came across that threshold, they caught sight of Barney Watkins stepping off the distance agreed upon, digging his heel into the ground and plowing the dry dirt as he reached the end opposite his principal.

"Twenty steps, an' thar ye hev it, critters!" he called forth with ugly defiance in face and tones as he glanced toward the other party. "Mebbe ye'd like to kick on *that*, too!"

"Why wouldn't we, then?" boldly retorted the Jaw-smith, his very beard bristling with scornful disgust as he viewed the lists. "Ef I couldn't do better'n *that*, durned ef I wouldn't go bag my head an' lay down to soak—I jest *would*, now!"

"What's the matter with it, you bag o' wind?"

"What's the matter? An' you've got the cheek to ax that, hey? Waal, didn't ye walk with one short leg, an' one long one—s-a-a-y?"

"Didn't I—what?"

"Didn't you take a he-ole straddle fer your pard, an' then a weenty baby-hop fer mine? An' hain't ye tryin' fer to sot up my gent twicet as close to *your* pard's gun, as your critter is from *my* gent—hey?"

Purty P'izen fairly roared this forth, seemingly so much in earnest that Barney Watkins was confused and half-awed until the burst of laughter coming from all sides cast a ray of light upon his brain.

"I'll even ye up fer that, flannel-mouth!" he began, but before he could say more, or Purty P'izen could come back at him with another flood of words, Chris Cresson interposed.

"Get down to business, gentlemen, and postpone your horse-play until later. I reckon the town's turned out to see something else than a sparring match with tongues for weapons."

"Set her to rolling, Barney!" harshly cried Redmond, seemingly nettled a bit by the lusty cheers which greeted the speech of his enemy, just then. "I'm ready, and I've been waiting so long I'm growing blue-moldy!"

"I kin smell it, cl'ar from here!" croaked Purty P'izen, one paw lifting to close over his nose in a suggestive manner.

But then Chris Cresson saved further trouble or loss of time by stepping forward to the mark scored by the heel of Barney Watkins, drawing a revolver with his right hand as he faced his adversary.

"Fall back out of line, gentlemen," came his easy warning. "I'll agree not to waste any lead on outsiders, but of course I can't answer for my friend opposite."

"You'll know mighty quick whar my lead has gone, cuss ye!" viciously threatened Redmond. "Who gives the word, Barney?"

"I do. Steady, now, fer durned ef I'll yelp until I see that both ends is ready sot an' waiting for the word!"

Neither of the principals spoke further, and as the eager witnesses saw them thus prepared, silence fell over the entire assemblage.

Barney Watkins seemed hard to suit, or else was trying to shake the nerve of the Crystal Sport by prolonging the strain; for second after second passed by without the word coming, until one minute had almost grown to a couple. Then—

"Fire!"

As though an electric tie connected that tongue with his leveled revolver, Hank Redmond fired on the instant, then sprung swiftly aside and stooped to peer under that curling ball of smoke.

It was a snap-shot, pure and simple, but for once in his life Redmond found his really marvelous skill as such had failed him, for Chris Cresson was still standing, and gave no signs of being touched by that shot.

With a fierce, snarling yell, the angry duelist leaped forward, meaning to close before the Crystal Sport could secure anything like the deliberate aim he seemed trying for.

Instead, Chris Cresson pulled trigger at once, then lowered his pistol-arm before even his keen eyes could take full note of the result.

With a hoarse, gurgling cry, Hank Redmond staggered forward, dropping his pistol, his hands fluttering, his head flying back as he fell like a mass of clay upon the stony street.

An instant's silence, then wild yells of hot rage burst from the gang to which Hank Redmond had belonged, and there came a menacing surge in that direction which might easily end in worse than threats.

But Purty P'izen was on the keen alert, and springing in front of his principal, drawing guns as he did so, he thundered forth:

"Back, ye hounds! 'Twas fairly done, an' he who dar's to say contrary, hes got to climb up my back afore he kin git at Glimmer-glass, hyar!"

A strong hand caught his shoulder and whirled him half-way around, leaving the Crystal Sport to confront the enemy himself.

"Don't fly off the handle, fellows, until you know just what you're kicking about. I've only marked Redmond—barely creased him—for I've no grudge against the hangman, that I should rob him of his dues!"

"You've bloody murdered him, an' now—"

"I'm talking to gentlemen, and that bars *you* out, Barney Watkins," coldly cut in the Sport, then adding: "Don't take my word for it, but look to yonder brute before you waste any more sympathy."

Turning away as though he had no further interest in the matter, Chris Cresson let a hand fall heavily on Purty P'izen's shoulder, giving him a half-turn which brought their eyes on a level, then coldly saying:

"Now then, my fine fellow, it comes *your* turn! Which is it to be—explain, or fight?"

"The good Lawd!"

"You'll need a heartier prayer than that, old man, if you elect to play on as you've begun," significantly adding:

"And the next shot I fire will go plum'center, ye mind!"

Purty P'izen cast a quick glance around them, and seemed relieved to find that attention was fairly centering about the fallen duelist. An altered expression came to his face, and in lowered tones he made answer:

"I'll explain, of course, sir. Shall we go to your hotel, or to mine?"

"Where do you hang out, first?"

"At the Midland."

"So do I. That cuts the choice down to nothing, and so—one moment, please!"

Turning so as to more squarely face the crowd which was densest about the body of Hank Redmond, but still keeping a hand on that arm, as though resolved to guard against another audacious breakaway on the part of this stranger, Chris Cresson lifted his voice to call forth:

"I'll leave you fellows to patch up my work, I reckon, but if there's any one among you all

who fancies he'd like a bit more fun with Chris Cresson, all right! I'm one of the easiest fellows to find—for fun or for earnest—that you ever tried to buck against!"

"I'm hanging out at the Midland Hotel. I'm going back there now. If wanted, just ask the landlord to call me, and I'll be on hand like a glove, if not quite as comfortable to the wearer!"

Chris Cresson paused a few moments for a reply or a possible challenge from another one of that rough and tough gang; but none such came, and slipping his hand through Purty P'izen's arm, the Crystal Sport moved away from the scene of his latest triumph.

"You did that up right neatly, pardner," observed his companion, a few moments later. "Was it merely a bluff, though, or did you actually play for a crease?"

"You heard what I said, didn't you, sir?" coldly asked Cresson.

"Yes, but—"

"All right. Are you so partial to lying yourself that you can't give a gentleman credit for speaking the truth?"

"You're digging it pretty roughly, my—"

"Any rougher than you dealt forth this afternoon?"

The Sport's tones were growing colder, harder, but now Purty P'izen broke into a low, chuckling laugh, his form shaking with what seemed unalloyed mirth. That sharp query evidently touched his humorous cord, one would fancy.

Possibly Cresson might have brought matters to a focus then and there, stung by that laugh over his recent humiliating defeat; but before he could take a step further, Purty P'izen deftly kicked both feet from under him, then hurled him violently to the ground!

CHAPTER X.

CHRIS CRESSON GIVES WARNING.

PURTY P'IZEN fell with his companion, his powerful arms closing about the body of the Crystal Sport, thus effectually hindering Chris Cresson from striking a blow or drawing a weapon.

But the instant their bodies struck ground, the self-styled Jaw-smith freed one hand to whip forth a revolver, from which he discharged several shots in rapid succession, at the same time crying hastily:

"Easy, Cresson! Those curs are after cold meat, and—"

A strong hand gripped his throat, cutting short those words, but even as he secured that deadly grip, the Crystal Sport began to recognize his mistake.

He saw that Purty P'izen was firing, not at or upon him, but away in the darkness out of which came a half-stifled cry, as though at least one of those hasty missiles had found a sensitive target.

"You're not— Explain, confound you, man!"

At the same time Purty P'izen freed his throat by a dexterous twist and writhe, then bluntly answered:

"Quit playing fool, and I'll do it, Cresson! Only for you, I'd have witnesses lying out yonder; but now—you're fuller of wriggle than a scorched snake, pardner!"

Swiftly as these sentences were flying back and forth, they were hardly completed before the silence which naturally follows closely upon an outbreak of this description, gave way before the chorus of cries and calls and sound of trampling feet.

The two men were at no great distance from the Empire, and it required no pause for reasoning to tell them those sounds came from the same crowd who had witnessed the duel by moonlight.

Neither was there time for consulting over their wisest course of action, and with a barely noticeable pause for thought, Purty P'izen lifted his voice and shouted forth:

"This way, gents! Fetch lights, and walk like 'twas on eggs, for—"

"For I'll check any rush with cold lead!" sternly supplemented the Crystal Sport, now upon his feet once more, and each hand filled by the butt of a revolver. "I'm getting hot under the collar, and when I do begin to sweat— Go easy, or fall heavy!"

This stern warning was intended fully as much for Purty P'izen as it was for the coming crowd in general, and though the spot where the two men now were, was filled with gloom, the Jaw-smith had eyes keen enough to see that one of those grim muzzles was turned his way.

"Don't shoot unless I try to run or dodge, Cresson," he said, in low tones, but which certainly showed no signs of fear. "I had to down you, or you'd have caught the knife, instead of the wood yonder."

There was no time for further explanations just then, since the rush was coming, and required a check to guard against possible treachery on the part of some of Hank Redmond's outfit.

"Steady, once more, gentlemen!" rung forth the voice of the Crystal Sport in warning.

"Wait for the lights, yonder, please."

"What's the racket, anyway?"

"More dirty play, of course. Don't crowd,

or somebody else will get hurt. Lively with those lights, please!"

"Which is what, an' hope may never see the back o' my neck ag'in ef Purty P'izen hain't gwine fer to eat his bigness, dirt or no dirt! Durn sech ways o' runnin' a town! Double-durn them as hain't got no more sense then to sling thar hardware round on the loose like—will ye take a holy squint at that, then?"

By the light of the first lantern to come up, and which Purty P'izen snatched from the hand of its bearer, the Jaw-smith pointed to where an ugly-looking weapon was sticking in the unpainted boards of the shanty close to which the two men had been passing at that critical moment.

A buck-horn hafted knife, the ten-inch blade of which was fashioned after Bowie's model. The keen, curved point was hidden in the dry wood, which fact alone was sufficient evidence as to the murderous purpose of its owner.

The brass hand-guard, the iron shank, the broad back, where the blade was nearly half an inch in thickness, all had aided the strong hand to bury the point deeply; and more than one stout fellow turned a shade paler as he saw how hard it was for Chris Cresson to wrench the weapon from the side of the building.

If sinking so deeply into seasoned wood, what might the bowie not have done had it sped true to the mark of flesh and blood?

"Hold 'em stiddy so, Glimmer-glass!" cried Purty P'izen, grasping another citizen with a lantern, and shoving him in the direction from whence that weapon must have come. "This way fer a squint, gents! I tuck a few guess-shots over hyar, jest on the chaine of ringin' the bell, but I don't reckon—Struck color, by p'izen!"

Snatching away the light from its bearer, Purty P'izen flashed the yellow rays upon a spotted stone, and then knew he had made no error; it was color, sure enough! And that color was red!

Like hounds on a hot scent, the little crowd scattered the next moment, rushing hither and yon, eagerly searching for the body from whence those crimson drops had been extracted; but all in vain.

Although there could be no doubt as to some person's having been wounded by one of those hasty, almost random shots, the sufferer had vanished, either through the assistance of his mates, or upon his own legs.

"Jest knocked the bark off, I reckon," declared Purty P'izen, giving the ground a more careful examination by the lantern-light. "Hyar's whar he tuck a trip an' a stumble when he felt the spur, and then draps leaked out afore he could squawmble up ag'in. Then—waal, looks like he maniged fer to squeeze the hole up with his paw, like, an' so thar don't no more color—"

"Over this way!" just then came an eager cry from where the other light was passing swiftly from side to side of the narrow street. "More color! He's took this route, for—"

"All right, me coveys!" cried Purty P'izen, rising erect and resigning that lantern to its rightful owner. "Foller the float-rock, an' mebbe you'll find the vein. Ef ye do—waal, I do reckon me'n my pard, Glimmer-glass, over yender, 'll pay as big a price fer the pan-out as ary other spec'lator you'll be apt fer to run up ag'inst."

"Don't you 'low to track 'em up, then?" asked the lantern-bearer.

"It's too blind a lead fer me, pardner, an' then thar's—Comin', pardner!"

With long, rapid strides Purty P'izen made his way across to where Chris Cresson was holding his portion of the crowd, but with growing impatience on his part.

"What's upot now, Glimmer-glass?" asked the Jaw-smith, as he hurried up in response to the call sent forth by the Sport.

"What did you find over there?"

"Jest color 'nough to show that thar was flesh an' blood at t'other eend o' the knife-route, but hardly 'nough fer to foller up. Why?"

"Tell these gentlemen what you saw, or what you heard, please. I'm mighty near as much in the dark my own self, or I'd save you the trouble. You saw—what?"

"Waal, 'twasn't so dug-gun mighty much, gents, an' yit 'twas plenty heap fer a hog!" declared the Jaw-smith, squaring himself as though for one of his windy orations.

"Boil it down, pardner!" coldly interposed the Sport. "All we care for right now are the naked facts."

"Jest so, an' ef Purty P'izeh cain't do the b'ilin' of it down, then Purty P'izen wants some dug-gun critter fer to show him the reason why. Mebbe you kin do that same, eh?"

His head shot suddenly forward, his glittering eyes fixed upon a heavily-bearded face which showed imperfectly in that dim light.

"Business, P'izen!" reiterated Cresson, his hand falling heavily upon the nearest shoulder. "No one now present had aught to do with the dirty trick, of course. Talk straight, and talk fast, will you, man?"

"Waal, I didn't know but what—All right, blame ye!" giving a writhe and a squeal as

Cresson's fingers seemed to sink into his flesh. "An' we was jest a-moseyin' long this yer way, gents, all, when I ketched a glimp' o' somethin' over yender; couldn't say jest what, nur yit jest why I done it, but I up an' kicked Glimmer-glass on the legs, an' tumbled all over him my own self, jest in time fer tu miss ketchin' that p'izen butcher—so thar!"

All in a breath came these words at last, but the Jaw-smith made his meaning perfectly clear to those who listened, and that was all needed, just then.

"There you have it, gentlemen," said Chris Cresson, speaking in his turn, and holding that ugly blade up to full view. "A mighty few words will finish my part of the introductory chorus, whatever else may follow."

"I'm fond of fun. I can enter into and enjoy sport or frolic with the next best man. But—and this is the kernel—I do like to have it just a weenty bit more even!"

"I think I've taken fully my share this evening, and so I feel more at liberty to give you all—and that 'all' includes those absent as well as those present, you will observe—fair warning that if any further tricks are played, I'm going out gunning for cold meat!"

"And now, a last word for to-night," holding that weapon aloft where all could see it. "I mean to hold fast to this bit of steel until its owner is found, or he comes to the front after his property. And, as a further inducement, I'll say just this: I've got an even five hundred dollars that is ready for the owner when he puts in a claim for this knife!"

"D'you offer that five for proof as to the owner, boss?"

"No, for I reckon I can find the fellow for a great deal less. The offer is confined to the owner, when he plucks up grit enough to admit himself an assassin!"

Without waiting for further questions, Chris Cresson thrust that bared blade into his girth, then slipped a hand through Purty P'izen's arm and moved away in the direction of their hotel.

None of the gathering ventured to follow them, and it was not long before they could talk without fear of having other ears catch their words.

Chris Cresson was the first to break silence, and his words were an odd mingling of warning and thanks.

"This makes twice you've downed me by hand and foot, Purty P'izen, but I'm not quite so hot over it as I was back in the hills, this afternoon."

"Well, that sounds half-way hearty, Glimmer-glass."

"Twice, I say," repeated the Sport, his tones hardening a bit as he added: "Still, I really reckon you'd better give fair warning before you try that on for the third time, P'izen!"

The Jaw-smith gave a low, brief chuckle before speaking:

"I didn't have time to spare for explaining, or for asking your permission, Glimmer-glass. And then—are you so dead certain that bit of cold steel was meant for *your* benefit?"

"What do you mean, now?"

"That I'm by no means certain it wasn't intended for *my* quietus, not yours," quietly answered the Jaw-smith.

"What?" and Cresson turned to squarely face him. "Then you are really what those rascals said—Firebrand Dick, the detective?"

"Which? Who? Me? Good Lawd, pardner, I'm jest Purty P'izen, the Jaw-smith!" declared the stranger, resuming his dialect with cool assurance.

CHAPTER XI.

A LITTLE SPARRING-MATCH.

TAKING this as an indirect assertion that Purty P'izen was not yet ready to make full confession, Chris Cresson replaced his hand, and once more moved along in the direction of the Midland Hotel.

"It's all right, if you can only think so, P'izen. And yet, don't you know, I've about made up my mind to get at the bottom facts, whether with or without your kind permission?"

"Some critters is built that-a-way," easily admitted the Jaw-smith, betraying no uneasiness at that significant tone. "An' ef I was you, reckon mebbe I'd be doin' of pritty much the same thing. Ef little is good, wouldn't the hull hog eat still better?"

"Is that p'izen, or merely a firebrand, pardner?"

"Which?"

Despite the annoyance which he really felt, Chris Cresson could not refrain from smiling, so blankly innocent sounded that query, and so utterly blank looked that bearded face, just then visible for a few moments as the pair passed in front of a saloon.

They were not far from the hotel now, and withdrawing his hand, the Crystal Sport coolly said:

"Pity to coerce you, isn't it, stranger? Now, if you *should* happen to feel as though important business called you in another direction, you'll not be obliged to use hand or foot on yours truly."

"But you, Glimmer-glass? Ef I *should* take

sech a notion, reckon *you* wouldn't try fer to play even all into a heap, would ye, now?"

"Find out by sad experience, as I have done," came the dry, noncommittal response; but there was light enough from the moon and stars to show the stranger a hand that was toying with a revolver-butt.

"Which makes it all the more bindin', in the words of the way-up poic, Glimmer-glass; an' ef ye was ever ketched into a cuckie-burr patch afore sheddin'-time, then mebbe ye kin guess a bit how p'izen tight the Jaw-smith is gwine fer to stick to ye—untel thar hain't so dug-gun many chancies fer a gun to bu'st a ca'tridge, aryway! See the p'int?"

"All right, P'izen, and I'll count myself jest one shell ahead, at least until after you've begun explaining how your hoof happens to be hung so limberly whenever I happen to be within its range."

No response was given to this pointed hint, and neither of the men spoke again until the hotel was reached.

As though through common courtesy, Cresson stepped back with a motion for his disreputable looking companion to take precedence, and the Jaw-smith was first to enter the lighted office.

Until that moment the Crystal Sport was by no means certain that Purty P'izen really intended to enter, or that he actually had taken lodgings at the Midland; but no sooner had the fellow entered than he briskly cried out, knocking back his limp hat-brim:

"Back ag'in, hash-boss! Hope ye hain't bin losin' fleash over worryin' for fear the Jaw-smith 'lowed to give ye the dirty shake!"

Chris Cresson heard only the first part of this characteristic address, for his foot had barely touched the office-floor when an excited cry broke forth, and an excited person bustled forward with both hands extended, like one intimate friend greeting another.

"Dot vhas you, nein? Mein gott! how all-oafer-feel-goot dot makes me shiver! Here? Liffing? All vell as effer? Und dose grayz vools howl all oafer, dot Grystal Ghris vhas gone deadt py himselluf, too!"

Of course the speaker was Morris Rosenblatt, the dealer in diamonds and precious stones, and before Chris Cresson could evade the excited, enthusiastic rush, his right hand was clasped by the German, and shaken as though a thirsty man was working at a pump-handle.

Hardly knowing whether or no this sudden solicitude in an almost perfect stranger might not cover another vicious attack, the Crystal Sport quickly twisted his hand free, but not so soon that he left behind it the bit of paper which Rosenblatt had held an instant before.

Swift as thought their eyes met, and a flash of warning passed from Jew to Gentile. And when Cresson brushed past the diamond-broker, there was nothing to be seen of that paper.

"Und dot vhasn't drue, I see me?" exclaimed Rosenblatt, still seeming strongly excited over the wild rumor which apparently had reached the Midland before the Sport. "I hears me dot you vhas gilled—vhas plowed vide oben py dose—und I vhas to see you later, mein tear sir! I haff me somedings to ask—'poudt sdone, und tiamondts, und—I gome pack again, you see—nein?"

All splutter and excitement, Morris Rosenblatt permitted his erratic prancings to carry him to the threshold, then he vanished into the night with ludicrous agility for one of his age and build.

"Waal, ef he hain't got 'em, an' got 'em mighty bad, then I wouldn't say so!" drawled Purty P'izen, his jaws closing with an audible click as his shaggy head nodded in that direction. "In a hurry, too, wasn't he?"

"Possibly so."

"In sech a p'izen hurry he went off an' fergot somethin', too, didn't he?" persisted the Jaw-smith, grinning broadly and winking an eye facetiously as he gave a sly nod toward that closed right hand.

Chris Cresson coolly stared back for a brief space in silence, then quietly asked:

"Anything that you claim, pardner?"

"Wouldn't know what to do with 'em ef I was to pick 'em up," declared P'izen, with a sidelong glance toward the few persons present, all of whom showed more or less interest in what was taking place there. "Jest drapped his manners, an' fergot to pick 'em up afore rackin' out!"

As he gave this explanation, Purty P'izen moved so as to bring them closer together, and without outward show of speaking, he softly whispered:

"Dollars to cents that paper concerns *me*, all the same!"

Once more his eyes flashed toward that closed hand, thus pointing his meaning too plainly for a mistake to be made by the Sport.

"All right, P'izen. If it wasn't against my principles to bet on a dead sure thing, I might go ye. As it is—I'm going up to my room, and if you're not too busy—"

"Never too busy fer to 'company a old side-pardner, an' ef you hain't jest that, Glimmer-glass, then I'd like fer to know the reason!"

Without waiting for more, or showing any solicitude as to what the little company might

think of his associates when such a specimen as the Jaw-smith could lay unrebuked claim to his friendship, Crystal Chris passed from office into hall, then motioned for Purty P'izen to precede him up that narrow flight of stairs.

"After me is manners, eh?" carelessly quoted the fellow, grinning as he made a mock bow, but showing no reluctance about going on in advance. "Bin a monstrous long len'th o' time, Glimmer-glass, sence I met up with a old pard so chuck-up-an'-runnin'-over with perliteness es you!"

"That's all right, P'izen, but a man's worse than a fool if he gives a second opening before the first trick has been explained to his satisfaction," coolly said the Sport, treading close at his heels. "And you haven't quite cleared your record, remember."

"Oh, 'tain't me that's kickin', Glimmer-glass, an' when you say— This the den, eh?"

Chris Cresson slipped a key into its lock, gave it a turn, then pushed the door open, saying crisply:

"Step in, pardner. Room enough, I reckon, if you don't try to play circus before I strike a light. If you should— Better don't, all the same!"

Even as he closed the door behind them, Cresson struck a match, and when its brief light showed him the candle resting on the rickety little wash-stand, he had another match ready to touch the wick.

When this was alight, he locked the chamber-door on the inside, and motioning his guest to take the single chair the little chamber could boast, he sunk down on the edge of the bed, his face showing cold and stern-set by the candle-light.

Purty P'izen accepted the chair as a matter of right, and now gazed blandly into the face of his host, showing no uneasiness, seemingly never more entirely at his ease than right then and there.

Their eyes met, and held each other for the space of nearly a minute, but while those of the Sport grew sterner, Purty P'izen seemed holding back a chuckle of mirth, or of—was it scorn?

Crystal Chris began to tingle all over as that doubt assailed him, but when he spoke his tones were cold and steady enough to cover all that weakness.

"You're not exactly what you claim to be, Purty P'izen."

"Are you, Glimmer-glass?" swiftly cut in the other.

"You are playing a cunning part for some end, evil or good, and I'm dead sure of so much, at least."

"Well, so are you playing a part, and hence ought to be perfectly willing to call it even-Stephen," again retorted the stranger.

A faint smile flitted across the handsome face of the Sport at this cool assurance, but his tones were hardly softened as he added:

"Hardly that, P'izen. It shows you've not forgotten to carry your nerve with you, though, just to hint at so much."

"Was it a hint? I really thought I made it an open assertion."

"Hint or assertion, never mind. I've brought you here on sober business, and we've seen a bit too much of each other to stand on a shade of meaning, one way or the other."

"All right, pardner, just so the shade isn't all piled on my slice of the pudding. It is pudding, you reckon, Glimmer-glass?"

If Purty P'izen hoped to win a laugh through cool impudence, he was disappointed, for Chris Cresson grew colder, sterner as he saw that his unwilling guest showed a desire to delay that explanation.

"Pie or pudding, you'll swallow the share portioned out for you, I reckon, P'izen, now I've brought you squarely up to the fodder-rack."

"Well, why not? You're trying to get at something, pardner, and if you'll just fling a hint this way, see how terrible sudden I'll lend you a boost over the stile!"

"Thanks, but haven't you loaned me just a trifle too much, already?" asked the Sport, with another fleeting smile. "And that's the very point I was leading up to, P'izen."

"Didn't I say I'd give you a boost, Glimmer-glass?"

"You've said more things than one that need an explanation, sir, and you've done—what? I saved you when those whelps had you foul, out in the hills, this afternoon—"

"And I saved you to-night, when that dose of steel was searching for your weak spot," quickly interposed Purty P'izen, dropping something of his former flippancy.

"Admitted, although you did hint the cast might possibly have been intended for your benefit," coolly said the Sport. "Still, even that service fails to square our account. I still owe you a blow and a kick, even giving you full benefit of this offset."

Purty P'izen gave a careless wave of one grimy paw at this, and with the lazy drawl of a millionaire regarding a worn penny, he spoke again:

"Don't mention it, pardner! I like to have a gent in my debt, and you might keep on owing

me double times over *that* much, without my chucking a dunat your cabeza—yes sir!"

"That's all right, from your side the fence, no doubt, P'izen, but I was brought up to square all accounts at the earliest possible moment. I owe you a lick and a kick; will you have them both right now, or can you show good reasons why not?"

Very easily, almost mildly sounded that voice, but Purty P'izen was shrewd enough to realize that he was only increasing his own peril by protracting this little sparring match, and his manner underwent an instant change.

His low, amused laugh died away, and his face grew sober, in keeping with his frank, manly tones, as he leaned forward a bit, his open palm extending the while.

"Now you're striking color, Mr. Cresson, and I'll gladly meet you on the dead level. I do owe you an apology for that trick, and right here you have it, sir!"

"I felt myself in a mighty tight box, when you came up and set me part way at liberty. I knew that it meant almost certain death to me if I couldn't escape the knaves—see?"

"Wasn't I helping you escape from them, then?"

"Now I can believe so much, but *then*— Well, if you knew it all, Cresson, I'm pretty sure you'd say I was at least partly justified in doubting whether or no you weren't one of the same gang, and—"

"After I choked that cur down!"

"It was only choking, remember, where almost any man would have used knife or gun," quickly said the stranger.

"And so called his mates to make worse trouble; that is mighty poor reasoning, P'izen!" retorted the Sport.

"And I was in a mighty poor fix for reasoning coolly, don't forget, Glimmer-glass! Then, too, I'd been warned to look out for tricks, and particularly warned against—the Crystal Sport!"

Chris Cresson gave a start at this blunt hint, and a wave of color spread over his face as those dark eyes watched the effect of that shot.

CHAPTER XII.

CHRIS CRESSON'S COOL CUSTOMER.

"ARE you turned crazy, man?" ejaculated the Sport, frowning darkly as he met that half-quizzical gaze and read in part what lay back of it all.

"Not that I know of, pardner; why, pray?"

"You said—warned? And against me?"

"I said nothing more than the sober truth, Mr. Cresson," declared the other, once more losing that touch of railery or sarcasm, speaking quickly yet earnestly. "I'll say it all over again, to avoid further mistakes."

"I was warned to keep on my guard against dangerous tricks. And in particular I was to keep a keen eye open for a party who was passing in these parts as the Crystal Sport!"

"Of course that meant me, then," slowly spoke Cresson, his brows contracted, and something like a look of trouble coming into his face. "As I'm the only man in the Black Hills who is entitled to that name, of course it *must* have meant me. Eh?"

"I reckon it did, particularly as the name of Christopher Cresson was added to the other."

"By whom? Who warned you against me?"

Purty P'izen leaned back in his chair, that half-quizzical smile returning to his face. For a moment or two he met that impatient gaze squarely, then lowered his eyes, giving a slight nod toward Cresson's right hand before saying:

"Since one keeps a secret, why not another, Mr. Cresson?"

"By which you mean—precisely what?"

"That you received a warning only a few minutes ago, and that same warning, I'm willing to lay odds, concerns myself. Now—catch on!"

His meaning was clear enough, and Chris Cresson could not affect to misunderstand his words: it was a veiled proposal to give confidence for trust, or a thinly disguised threat to hold fast his secret in turn.

Somehow he could not help feeling that he was meeting his match, if not something more, in this glib-tongued stranger; yet this feeling gave him more wonder than anger, even with those occasional twinges of pain in his stomach where that heavy foot had fallen.

For a few seconds longer neither man spoke or made a move, but at the end of that period, the Crystal Sport slipped a hand into a pocket, bringing forth a crumpled bit of paper.

"Have a light, Glimmer-glass?" asked Purty P'izen, quickly picking up the candlestick and extending it, with a grim smile bristling his beard and drawing wrinkles about his eyes.

Without further hesitation the other opened that paper, and upon it his keen eyes made out the penciled words:

"Prove before trusting. Hardest of all to parry is a blow from cover."

There was neither address nor signature, but Chris Cresson could not well doubt what and who was meant, nor who had written that thinly veiled warning.

He glanced up from the paper, to meet that quizzical gaze, and once more he felt something akin to shame as he knew the color was rising to his temples. Why should this stranger have power to stir his blood after such a fashion? Who was he to—

"Shall I rattle it off, mind-reader style, Glimmer-glass?" coolly asked the stranger.

"If that means I'm afraid or ashamed to show you the note, let this answer you, P'izen," coldly spoke Cresson, pushing both light and paper toward his present companion.

"If that's meant for a bluff, see how elegantly I call it down, will you, pardner?" chuckled the Jaw-smith, turning the paper so the penciled words met his keen gaze. "Sorry, but I'm a regular old woman when it comes to unadulterated curiosity."

"Well, since you've read the words, maybe you can give a guess as to the one I'm warned to prove before trusting?"

"Means me, of course, but the fellow is cracked—decidedly cracked, or else was born a crank!"

"That's easily spoken, but—"

"Because only an idiot or one who has good reasons for wanting to make you fight shy of your best friends, would even think of sending you such a warning. Why, man, dear, what possible reason can you have for fighting shy of a detective?"

"A detective, you say?"

"Exactly," with a cool little nod, seemingly paying no heed to the start which Chris Cresson gave at that title, or to the flush which as briefly tinged that face with warm color.

Just as swiftly the Crystal Sport rallied, and there was nothing out of the ordinary in either face or voice as he spoke again:

"Then those fellows were right, this afternoon?"

"In roping me like a maverick, do you mean?"

"In what was said after you left me—short of wind and long of toothache, of course!"

"Unluckily I wasn't nigh enough the spot to hear just what they *did* say, but it could hardly have been complimentary?"

"They took you for a detective, called Firebrand Dick. Were they in the right of it, so far?" came the blunt question.

"So far as deciding I was Firebrand, yes," admitted the detective. "And in taking the scare, as they surely did, they've unwittingly shown me one way to strike home!"

"Then you're here after road-agents?"

"Well, not exactly," was the answer, coming with a touch of hesitation, though there was naught in those frank eyes that savored of doubt as to the reliability of the Crystal Sport. "That is, you understand, I wasn't sent here to break up a road-gang, but I begin to fancy they are mixed up in the case I've undertaken to sift."

Chris Cresson lowered both eyes and head for a bit, his right hand going up to thoughtfully feel of his dense beard, like one who is busy with thoughts which can hardly be termed agreeable.

Firebrand Dick, to give the detective the title he had acknowledged, sat in equal silence, covertly studying that handsome face, yet in readiness to veil his interest the instant those long lashes should begin to lift the veil.

That silence lasted for nearly a minute, and when it was broken by Chris Cresson at last, his voice was as grave as his face.

"That's a good disguise you're wearing, Firebrand, but I saw through it the moment you spoke to me over at the Empire."

"Wasn't it because I intended you should recognize me, though?" the detective asked, with a faint smile.

"I don't think so," quickly asserted the Sport. "And as proof that my eyes are not so exceptionally keen, how about those other fellows?"

"Meaning Barney Watkins and company, of course?"

"Yes. They surely saw that you were something more than you looked on the surface, and—"

Crystal Chris broke off abruptly for the detective was laughing in his face. And yet it hardly seemed like an insult, either.

"What if I tell you that is precisely what I wanted, friend?"

"You mean—"

"That I was playing for just *that* much. I mean, that I intentionally exposed myself to suspicion, for I felt morally certain those fellows were, in part at least, those who roped me on the stage trail."

Now the Sport did give a start, and his flush was one of part anger at least, as he caught the full meaning of those cool words.

"What! You dared—why, you infernal—"

"Go easy my good friend," quickly interposed the detective, lifting one hand with a deprecatory gesture. "At least wait until I've finished my explanation before flying clean off the handle, please."

"But when you— Well, go on, then!"

Christopher sunk back upon the bed, drawing a long breath as though he felt the need of some such brace to keep his resolution.

Possibly Richard Fyerband was keen enough

to realize how strong that temptation was, for he deliberately turned back a few hours, in order to give Cresson more time in which to cool off.

"Well, my good friend, I'll try to make it all clear to your comprehension, if you'll bear with me a few moments longer in patience.

"You know now why I was so eager to give those knaves the slip, and why I was so ready to suspect you of belonging to that same outfit."

"I can't see just how you reason that all out, but—go on!"

"Thanks, muchly," with a light little nod.

"Well, then, when I saw an opening, of course I jumped at it, and while I'm apologizing to you for such rough usage, I won't deny that I'd act precisely the same way if it all had to pass over again."

"Drop that part, and come down later: why did you mix me up in what was and still ought to be your own private muss? That's what's biting me keenest, just now, bear in mind."

Chris Cresson spoke with undisguised earnestness, but Firebrand Dick merely chuckled, barely above his breath, just as though he was congratulating himself on his shrewd foresight.

"Well, I'll tell you, Mr. Cresson. As I hinted before, I was warned to keep on my guard against a certain personage who was figuring here in Deadwood as the Crystal Sport, and—"

"Warned by whom?"

"Let that come later on, please."

"Suppose I insist upon having it settled right now?"

"You would suffer disappointment, and I might suffer death," coolly bowed the detective. "In other words, it must be later on or not at all. Trust me so far, and I'll finally meet you on the square, provided, of course, you can read your title clear to that trust."

Their eyes met and remained fixed for the space of half a minute: an age, under such circumstances!

Cresson saw that Fyerband was in dogged earnest so far, and he had seen quite enough of the detective to feel fairly confident that not even the menace of death could weaken his resolution, once it was formed. And he had no wish, for his own part, to go quite that far in order to gain his ends.

"Well, rather than run long risks, Mr. Fyerband, we'll let that point pass for the present; but not until I've given fair warning that I mean to call you to a strict account for your words, as well as your actions. Understand?"

"Perfectly, and I'm willing to promise full satisfaction, in one way or the other, at the earliest practical moment."

"Enough. You set out to say?"

"That I really wanted those tough cases to see I was in disguise," declared the detective, promptly picking up the dropped thread. "If you ask my reasons for so wishing, you can have them, sir."

"What are they, then?"

"Well, the first runs like this: if these fellows really belong to the gang who meant to make a holy example of me, out—"

"One of them did, at least," cut in Cresson. "I recognized the fellow I caught with you in bonds, and heard him call Jim, or Jimmy Johnson. He was one of that sweet-scented outfit to-night at the Empire."

"Thanks. I thought as much, myself," said Fyerband, with a nod of grim satisfaction. "I acted on that belief when I made myself known to you and afterward cut a splurge as the Jaw-smith."

"Why did you trust me at the Empire, when you couldn't trust me out in the hills only a few hours before?" bluntly demanded Cresson.

"Because you were being crowded upon by the gang I had such good cause to fear," frankly. "And so I chipped, partly to give those devils a misleading clue; they'll waste precious time hunting for Purty Pizen, don't you see? For they'll feel morally certain he is Firebrand Dick and they'd give—Ahem!"

Chris Cresson's lip curled a bit at that abrupt break, but he made no mention of it as he spoke, quietly:

"That is one reason, Mr. Fyerband; but you had another."

"One more, yes," with a curt little nod of his shaggy head, at the same time casting a glance toward the closed and locked door. "Do you really wish to hear that as well?"

"Why not go the entire porker, pardner?"

"Well, I exposed myself and chipped in heavy on your side so as to turn their suspicions toward you, Mr. Cresson," coolly said Firebrand.

"What! Do you mean it, man?"

"Certainly I mean it; and right here you have my explanation and my excuse, both in one," calmly added the detective. "Knowing I've tackled a big job, and feeling that I might need a good, true man to back me up in my fight for the right, how could I insure such backing easier than by mixing you up in the case? You'd fight if crowded, of course?"

"Well, of all cool hands, you carry off the ice-house!" exploded the Crystal Sport, amused despite himself by that supreme assurance.

"Easy, pardner. The coolest hand is right

out in the hall yonder, playing spy at your keyhole! Open and see, if you don't believe it," came in a swift whisper from those bearded lips

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DIAMOND-DEALER.

As Firebrand Dick made that whispered announcement, his dark eyes seemed backed by living fire, and his gaze to pierce that wooden barrier as though it was nothing more substantial than a thin veil of mist.

For a brief space Chris Cresson could scarcely realize the truth of those words, but then, as his quickened hearing caught a faint sound coming from the corridor, his own eyes caught a dangerous glitter, and springing from his bed, he turned key and knob, then flung the barrier wide—or as widely open as that deftly-placed obstacle would permit.

In acting so swiftly the Sport could not possibly have given a thought to the personal peril he might be inviting, but it was different with the detective; and with a deft spring, Firebrand Dick placed himself behind the opening door, where he would be out of sight in case his suspicions of spies or eavesdroppers proving correct.

Opening the door so suddenly cast the light squarely upon the bent figure of a single man, and as a simultaneous exclamation found birth, Chris Cresson recognized Morris Rosenblatt, the diamond-dealer!

"What the deuce—"

"Mein Gott in himmell! how you vhas vrighten me out!"

Cresson flashed a glance up and down that gloomy passageway, each side of which ran a row of small bed-chambers; but he failed to sight any one else, and then returned to the charge, just as a match flashed up in Rosenblatt's hand.

"What are you trying to play, you—"

"Look! py glory, uff I vhasn't find it so kevick, already!" spluttered the diamond-dealer, springing forward a few feet, pointing to where a precious stone was gleaming on the floor in that double light.

Although he seemed so hugely delighted by his good fortune, Rosenblatt made no attempt to retrieve his loss until the keen eyes of the Crystal Sport could follow the direction of that pointing finger, and take full note of that glittering excuse.

"Holy Keristopher!" once more exploded the broker, giving his hands a wild flourish as that tiny torch burned to his finger-end, then thrusting the smarting member into his mouth.

That obstacle did not stop his tongue, although it rendered his accent still more intricate for the moment.

"I vhas dinks me so mooch outd—more a bile as I makes me brodt dis Tendwood insite uff, so hellup me Moses! Und now, when I makes me come up dis vay, on a goose-vild hundert—looks you py dot!"

Out came his scorched finger to point once more at yonder gleaming spark, and the diamond-dealer gave a laugh that shook his clumsy figure from crown to sole.

It was admirably played, and might possibly have taken in the Sport, only for actions and words which had gone before. Surely this stranger was taking too close an interest in his movements to be altogether what he seemed on the surface?

Morris Rosenblatt, having explained himself sufficiently, nimbly secured that glittering object, and turning back to the Sport, held up the gem for inspection, hurriedly speaking:

"You see, mein herr? It vhas not kevite so pig as a voot-ball, but vorth—vell, vorth more as I likes me to lose py garelessness, eh?"

"Well, I reckon you have been a bit too careless, stranger," coldly assented Cresson, but before he could say more, Rosenblatt broke in.

"I say me dot, too, ain't it? I lose me dose shewel—bure vater as you vind outd in a hurry, eh? Und when I dinks me uff I hef dose py my fingers to show for sale—see? Dot vhas glean gone mit outd so mooch as a goot-pye speakink!"

"Careless, I said, stranger, and just how careless I'm not so mighty sure you fully realize. So—take my word for it, please—you'd a heap sight better lose a diamond than find a chunk of lead. Catch on?"

"I don't—I vinds me dot tiamondt, und so she vhas not lost in soper drudth, see?"

"I don't think it was lost," with pointed emphasis, his dark eyes gleaming dangerously as a finger tapped the diamond dealer on an arm.

"I don't believe you thought it was lost, either. And so I say just this much, Mr. Morris Rosenblatt:

"The next time you come searching for precious stones in the dark, outside my chamber door, better don a bullet-proof overcoat first!"

Rosenblatt shrunk back a bit, his eyes showing very wide back of those tinted glasses, his heavy beard not entirely concealing how his lower jaw dropped. He formed the very picture of surprise and mortification, and his defense came in an indignant splutter.

"I neffer—dot vhas a shame! I vhas schust hunding me dose broperdy I lose me, and when you—so hellup me Keristopher—"

"It'll take more than one saint to help you out of the mix, pardner, if y u try this little scheme on again," curtly interrupted Cresson. "As it is, I hope you caught enough through my keyhole to pay for your time and trouble?"

"I neffer did—"

"And you never will but once more; mind that, Sheeny!" sharply cut in the Crystal Sport, stepping back inside the chamber, and closing the door as before.

For a moment it seemed as though the insulted diamond-dealer meant to assault that barrier, for his clinched hand flew up, and he even took a step nearer the portal; but then his intention must have altered, for without word or sound he wheeled to the rightabout, and passed down the flight of stairs to the ground floor.

The distance was by no means great, but when Morris Rosenblatt gained the office, his features were composed as usual, and his strong emotion no longer betrayed itself.

As luck would have it, only the landlord was in the room just then, and as he turned a careless glance that way, the diamond-dealer evidently thought it might be worth his while to ask a few questions.

"I vhas so dry like a godvish in bickle, landt-lort!" he ejaculated, giving vent to a deep breath that lacked little of being a sigh. "Vix me a trink; make it so I gool off uff I vhas too hot, und so I varm me some more uff I legn to shiffer—eh?"

"Easy as taking a tumble down hill," declared the landlord, bringing forth a plain decanter and a glass. "Faith-cure, sir. Just make a wish whichever way ye want it, and it's right thar!"

"Is dot so?" ejaculated Rosenblatt, eying the decanter through his smoked glasses as though it must contain something beyond naked whisky.

"That's so. You touch the critter, and imagination does the rest."

"I vonder at dot! Vell, anyway, you don't pe avraidt to bite your own tog a piece off, eh?"

"Just as soon drink with you as anybody I know of, friend," laughingly assented the landlord, producing a second glass. "Heelp yourself. Drink hearty, and may it hit the hungry spot!"

"Same vay py me," with a bow, and their glasses clinked softly together. "Bur-r-r-rool dot pites me scharb like a baber uff bins all coing grossvays town!"

"Just a wrong belief, I assure you sir," blandly asserted mine host, smacking his own lips after the libation. "The pure quill, and my own particular brand."

"Vell, next dime I ask me vor odder prandt, see?" with a forced laugh as he tossed forth a coin by way of payment. "Und now—vonder you vhas too pusy to ask me some answers, nein?"

"To—Oh!" with a flash of comprehension.

"You have something to ask me, is it?"

"Dot shentlemans who makes a show-vindow all oafers himselluf: is he glean gray?" earnestly inquired the diamond-dealer, a rather dingy hand reaching over to gently pat the landlord's arm. "Vhas he resbonsipile when he preaks outd? Vhas he—eh?"

"If you mean Mr. Cresson—"

"I means me dot vheiler dose lies say vhas all killed in a heab, schust a leedle while dis eafening. I means me dot shentlemans who has room up her—I knows me not his numper, but—vhehl, he vears himselluf all oafers grysdals—see?"

"Just so. Well, what about him?"

"You don't vorget how clad I vhas when he gomes himselluf pack all oafers lifely, eh? I vhas a tealer in breacions adones. He vears dose grystals, und dot—Vell, it show he oppreciates shewels, eafen when he don't vhas rich enough to vear de shenocine vones—eh?"

"Yes?"

"Dot's so! Und I vhas clad he neffer git killed, so, too! Und when I goes me out—dot vay—und I vinds me I heff lose a tiamondt—see!" bringing forth that gleaming gem and rolling it on the bar before those suddenly-admiring eyes.

"Look at her glimmer, will ye, man?"

"Burest vater, und vor sale so sheap—maype you like to puy, is it so?" eagerly spluttered the dealer. "I makes you dot so low a brice on, you crow rich in two minudes dose vatch py—yes!"

Mine host drew back the better to resist temptation, shaking his head decidedly enough, however.

"Couldn't do it, even if I wanted to, sir. Put'er up! And—you started to ask something about the Crystal Sport, didn't you?"

"Dot so, und now—I vindt I gan't vind me dot tiamondt when I looks me all oafers, und I hurry me pack here like a tog on a rappit-drack. Und I hurry me py mein shamber—you know—und when I vhas making me hundert dot ball oafers mein shewel afderr—out shumbs dot grayz vhehler, und makes like he schwallow me in a von bite—yes!"

"Thought you was listening at his door, maybe," coolly.

"Und dot vhas a insoolt so plack as I crow mad all oafers!"

"And you want me to carry a challenge to fight, of course?"

"Holy M—me? Vight? Dot grazzy mans? Vhell, vhell, uff you don't makes me dink you more grazzy as him!" angrily spluttered Rosenblatt, whirling away from the bar and shambling in hot haste out of the hotel.

Whether intentionally or not, Morris Rosenblatt followed almost precisely in the footsteps of the Crystal Sport at an earlier hour of that same evening, and, also like Chris Cresson, when his eyes were caught by the glowing red light in front of the Empire Saloon, his steps turned thither, and pausing for a brief space at the threshold, the diamond-dealer permitted his gaze to wander over that brilliantly-illuminated scene.

It was pretty much the same thing which greeted the eyes of Glimmer-glass not so very long before him, and there certainly was no sign remaining of that exciting play in which the Sport had taken such a prominent part.

Now, as then, the long bar was being liberally patronized, with rough-clad men in the large majority, although cash payments ruled as a matter of course.

Still, that was nothing odd in a mining town. The raggedest, most dilapidated-looking person to be met with might easily turn out to be the richest man in camp.

To the right of that long bar showed the curtain-draped archway by way of which admission was had to the gaming department of the Empire, and from his position Rosenblatt could see sufficient to know play had fairly opened for the night.

If the diamond-dealer had been a witness of that little fracas at an earlier hour, he might have recognized Barney Watkins, Jimmy Johnson, and several others who had taken a more or less active part in it, now gathered together in a corner of the saloon, covertly yet keenly keeping guard over the front entrance, possibly anticipating another visit from the Crystal Sport, or Purty Pizen, his talkative second.

But all minor details were passed over, if not forgotten, the moment Morris Rosenblatt rested eyes upon that velvet-clad figure reclining in yonder easy-chair—the figure of Empress Jo, who never looked more bewitching in all her life than right then and there.

The light from the chandelier above fell fairly over her richly-garbed person, and the rays were reflected from the jewels she wore.

Possibly these had something to do with that fascinated gaze; it could hardly be termed less, since the diamond-dealer slowly, inch by inch as it were, moved toward the seat of the Empress, his head slightly forward, his fingers working nervously, his eyes glowing back of their masking glasses with far more than customary fire.

Possibly it was this very intensity of his gaze that caused it, or the Empress may have taken note of his entrance at the time; but be that as it may, only a few minutes passed after this fashion before Josephine St. John uttered a faint, sibilant hiss, which caused Frenchy Frank Mitchell to lift his head, and his eyes from the cards he was still toying with at the little table beneath the chandelier.

His eyes caught a silent dispatch from hers, and rising to his feet the gambler leisurely passed around to pause for an instant back of her chair—barely long enough for Josephine to whisper in guarded tones:

"Yonder he is again! Fetch him over here, Frank."

Apparently the diamond-dealer had been spoken of before, else how could Mitchell have singled him out so readily from that indefinite command? And he strode directly up to Morris Rosenblatt, with what those who knew him best were wont to call his danger-smile upon his lips.

CHAPTER XIV.

A DEAL IN PROSPECTIVE.

"GOOD-EVENING, sir, coldly saluted the gambler, bowing stiffly as his coming caused the diamond-dealer to give a start, through having his vision blotted out by that sable-clad torso.

"Goot-eafening—goot-eafening!" spluttered the broker, shrinking just a bit as he met those cold, yet glowing eyes. "I don't vhas indrooding, is it so?"

"The Empire is free to all, so long as they behave themselves, yes; but—"

"Und I heff me not speak until you vhas speak foorst, so I don't pe wrong, eh?" nervously chuckled the merchant, rubbing his dirty palms together, smirking and grinning very much like one who feels the chances are rather in favor of his getting "bounced," after all.

Frenchy Frank seemed a bit taken aback by this unexpected manner, but as quickly rallied, one thumb making a slight gesture toward the enthroned Empress as he coldly uttered:

"That's all right, far as it goes, stranger, but eyes sometimes say more than tongues, and yours have been talking—just what?"

"Holy Apraham! I hear vhat you say, but uff I know me vhat you means, I lie all oafar dot vatch! I talk out uff mein eyes! I makes me— So bellup me holy cracious, I don't vhas make it out, anyhow!"

The agitated merchant was shifting his weight

from one foot to the other, then back again, his fingers writhing and twisting in painful embarrassment, his face alternately flushing and paling before that cold, piercing stare.

"Of course, if you meant no slur, no insult—"

"I neffer means noddink like dot! I vhas high oafar peing so low town as dose! Und—I vhas a shendlemans, sir!"

A faint smile curled that mustached lip at this rather dilatory assertion, but then Frenchy Frank added in the same icy tones:

"I sincerely trust you may prove your claim correct, sir, but your peculiar stare has already caused yonder lady intense annoyance, and—"

"Laty? Annoy—oh, vhas dot der madder?" his face lighting up and the shadow of a smile coming into view as he hurriedly added: "Oxcoose me, tear sir! I vhas neffer see dose laty, not voncel!"

"What? After staring so intently, for so long?"

"Look py her two ears, und dot white neck, und dose leedle hands, und—look py dose shewels, I say!" with a husky whisper that sounded strained, and evidenced an effort which accounted for the swelling of the veins on his temples and that access of color.

"What of those jewels, sir? Surely you don't—who may you be, anyway sir?"

Those active fingers quickly produced a bit of pasteboard, and on it Frenchy Frank beheld the name and trade, "Morris Rosenblatt, Diamond Dealer."

"I vhas dose, you see, my tear sir," eagerly explained the broker, tapping that bit of board with a nervous forefinger. "I teal me in tiamondts, und brecious sdones. I draff der goundry oafar, und bick me up pargains like dose a mans neffer vinds gomes his vay when he sdicks his store inside of—see?"

"And you reckon—do you take this establishment for a junk-store, Mr. Rosenblatt?"

"Vhas I sooch a vool in my vace, den?" asked the diamond-dealer, with a faint grin and shrewd twinkle of his masked eyes. "Vhas it a pig grime I makes me, when I atmires dose shewels? Uff so— Vhell, I makes me mein oxcooses, aind't it?"

Passing the gambler by means of a deft duck and glide, the diamond-dealer marched squarely up to the enthroned Empress, doffing his hat and bowing his gray head lowly before saying:

"Oxcoose me, matam—oxcoose me all oafar, I peg me meekly!"

"Sir?"

"Oxcoose me vor— Peg bardon vonce more, but uff I may— Mein cracious!"

Seemingly forgetting the elaborate apology which he had started to utter, Morris Rosenblatt bent still lower, at the same time drawing nearer that richly-laden easy-chair, his glittering gaze fixed upon—not the woman, but her earrings!

Flushing warmly, Empress Josephine drew back as far as that cushioned rest would permit, her right hand flying up to grip the jeweled hilt of the dagger which she wore in her hair, Spanish-fashion.

"Sir! Dare you offer an insult to me?" she sternly demanded, yet with lowered, rather than raised tones.

Time enough to call for assistance when she found herself powerless for self-defense—a day she had never yet known!

Again was the diamond-dealer cast into confusion and covered with painful embarrassment, thanks to his unlucky passion for precious stones.

"Oxcoose me—dousandt dimes oafar, blcase oxcoose me, laty!" he mumbled, smiling and bowing, rubbing his hands and cracking his finger-joints after what would have been a ludicrous fashion, had it not come nearer the disgusting.

"Will you explain yourself, then, sir?" coldly asked the Empress.

"It vhas dose tiamondts, matam," still bowing, still smiling painfully, his back working as though the spine had suddenly been filled with so much quicksilver. "I vhas a— Bermit me—so!"

A card similar to that given Frenchy Frank was hastily produced and dropped into that velvet lap, then the diamond-dealer smiled still more earnestly as he watched those fair hands lift the bit of paper.

An instant change came over the Empress, face and manner, as she read those printed words, and looking up into his face with a brilliant smile and a flash of her dark eyes which fairly dimmed the sparkle of her jewels, Josephine spoke:

"And you have diamonds to sell, Mr. Rosenblatt? How delightful!"

"To sell, und to puy, matam," with a more natural bow and tone of voice, now that the breakers were being avoided. "I drades either vhay, schust so I makes me a brofit—"

"Cent. per cent., of course?" with a soft little laugh.

"Holy Apraham!" with hands flying up and eyes lifting for an instant. "Uff dot vhas so, how long you dinks I vhas co vandering all dese vild regions drough? How long I vhas pe in gedding pack py home, do seddle town a rich

shendlemans, der mittle uff a vamily inside uff—eh?"

"You are a man of family, then, Mr. Rosenblatt?" asked the Empress, with the faintest possible accent of—was it disappointment?

Morris Rosenblatt smiled and smirked and bowed afresh just as though he believed he knew how to answer that query. And when he made answer, it was with a sigh which spoke equally plain on his part.

"Nod a vamily, as yet, matam, but vhen a rich man—a shendlemans who has peen making shent ber shent—eh? Is it nod so, matam?"

"He has but to pick and choose, you think, then?"

But even so quickly the broker's fidelity was shaken, or, rather, his notice was returning to his first love, and with glowing eyes fixed upon those glittering stones, his head was bending lower and nearer, like one under the fascination of the serpent told in fables.

For a few moments Empress Josephine watched him in turn, with eyes half-veiled, yet full of a strange fire; but then she made an impatient movement which quickly recalled the man to his senses once more.

"Oxcoose me, matam! I neffer see me more bure shewels as dose, uff dey vhas not kevite so pig as— Oxcoose me, I peg bardon!"

"Granted, Mr. Rosenblatt, although I'm—a woman," murmured the Empress, with a bewitching smile curling her richly red lips.

Once again the diamond-dealer seemed to catch her meaning as by instinct, and he returned that smile, bowing as he whispered, softly:

"Ach, mein Gott! how vhell I knows me dot, matam! Eaferypoty vhas vree to atmire a shewel like dose—a lifeless sdone—but vhen it gomes to de most brecious shewel uff all dis vorldt gondains!"

"Touch lightly, my dear sir," murmured the Empress, with a swift flash of her eyes toward the table at which Frenchy Frank was once more seating himself.

Morris Rosenblatt heaved a mighty sigh, shrugging his shoulders and throwing out his open hands in true foreign fashion.

"Is it nod so, matam? A tiamondt is vree to all atmiring eyes, bud vhen a pody gomes to look at a laty, whose vace is more vorth as a d'ousand tiamondts—"

"Enough, I say," with a sudden touch of hauteur in her tones. "You deal in precious stones, you say?"

"Yest, matam," with a meek bow, his hands clasping and touching his hollowed chest as that low bow was duplicated. "Brecious shewels uff all zorts, bud tiamondts a sbecially. Oh, how I loafes dose burdy sbarklers! How I goes mein kenees town on, und vorships dem! It is so," with solemn earnestness, as the Empress gave a little start at his wildly-exaggerated speech. "I loafe me dose—"

"Are you buying, or merely seeking to sell, Mr. Rosenblatt?"

The diamond-dealer was not so obtuse that he failed to see what was made so evident: this lady had no further use for ecstasies, but was bent on business of some description: just what, was his part to find out as quickly as practicable.

"More puying as selling, bud—you vhas haf some more as you gare vor, matam?"

"Well, that depends, of course," with a white finger tapping an ear-pendant, causing the diamond to flash like living fire as it swung to and fro. "A reasonable price might tempt me, but—of course you only purchase at your own price?"

Morris Rosenblatt flung out his open palms once more, accompanied by a shrug which spoke volumes.

"Uff gourse I heff me to make a brofit on, or how vhas I liff und oxbenses bay ub?" he said, with a faint grin, which vanished as he added: "Bud vhen I teal me a laty vith—dot is tiffer-ent! I bays her brice den, und makes it eafen off dot nexdt gusdome—see?"

"Especially when that lady has a fair knowledge of gems and their full value," pointedly added the Empress.

"So? Den here she vhas; I teal mit you like I vhas your own prother, py cracious! I tivides all brofits mit you—nein!"

"Well, that certainly sounds fair on the face of it, Mr. Rosenblatt, and I'm not so certain but what— By the way, though," like one struck with a second thought. "You are trading on your own capital, of course?"

"Surely my last offer dells you so much, matam!" half-reproachfully answered the diamond dealer. "I know it vhas gusdomey to shoke at a Sherman Jaw—I know all dose vile shokes—bud uff I vhas only von achent vor a gombany, how I makes dot offer to tivide brofits, eh?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but—let that pass, then," said the Empress, with a conciliatory smile. "And you are well-heeled? Pardon again, I beg," with a charming blush at the involuntary slang. "I meant to ask if you were rich enough—"

"I heff me moneys blenly, so var, matam," quietly said the diamond-dealer, like one who appreciates her embarrassment and is more than

willing to help her out. "I bromise to bay gash town, when you wants to sell me—is it dose ear-pops, matam?"

"In part, maybe," slowly answered the Empress, shading her eyes from the light with one hand, yet steadily, even piercingly gazing into that gray-bearded face before her seat. "But if I had others—a vast value, all diamonds, in fact—you could still make the trade, for cash?"

"I heff me mooch money, matam, und I heff me vays uff vetching me more as dot, when I see me a brofidaple drade aheadt. Und—you really heff dose tiamondts, matam? You really vands to drade mit me, nein?"

That keen scrutiny still endured, and it was some little time before Empress Josephine spoke again, her voice lowered to a guarded whisper:

"And if that profit was large enough, it would seal your lips, Morris Rosenblatt? If I knew you could keep a secret which—"

Her whisper died away without completing that sentence, but the diamond-dealer never changed a muscle, nothing save his vividly glowing eyes betraying his thoughts, born of that strange whisper.

"Dot pelongs to de drade, matam," he softly murmured, then added, by way of more explicit assurance:

"All I ask, all I looks me oudt vor, is dose shewels vorth de moneys? Is dose tiamondts shenocine? Is dot all blain tealing, und no dricks blaying?"

"If I conclude to trade, be sure I'll offer nothing but genuine stones, and that of the very first water, sir!"

"Und den—listen, matam! Uff I puy, I seal all mein libs tight oop! Und uff dose sdone vhas—vhell, sometimes my tiamondts gadder a leedle tirt, or maybe a sdain: I vipe it off, und who knows pedder?"

Vailed though he kept it, no one who contemplated crooked dealings could possibly have mistaken his meaning, and the Empress gave a swift nod, as of full approval.

At that very instant, just when the gang under lead of Barney Watkins was moving past the twin thus talking in whispers, the lights went out with the rapidity of thought, and before he could utter a cry or in any manner defend himself, the diamond-dealer was pounced upon and twisted off his feet, then as rapidly hustled away through the darkness!

CHAPTER XV.

THE DETECTIVE'S CHARGE.

It was hardly the most dignified position imaginable, but Firebrand Dick gave that consideration precious little thought, just then.

His keen sense of hearing had told him at least one human being was prowling about in that gloomy corridor, and almost certainly playing spy upon the occupants of that chamber.

Unless he was mistaken altogether, that meant mischief, and when the Crystal Sport acted so hastily, and with such reckless decision upon his whispered hint, the detective lost just as little time in placing himself under at least partial cover. That frail barricade would do little in the way of turning a bullet in case powder was burned, but—

That was good enough excuse for Richard, and fully as far as even his swiftly-working mind could go before action was taken. And then, with right hand gripping a pistol, which had replaced the guns taken by Hank Redmond, Firebrand Dick listened and looked—for he could even catch a passing glimpse of the two figures by pressing his nose tightly to wall and to crack.

Thus he heard all and saw part, and was back in his seat once more when Chris Cresson gave the diamond-dealer that final grim warning and stepped back to close his chamber door as before.

The Sport stood with bent head, listening intently just inside the little apartment, until he heard Morris Rosenblatt pass along the corridor and descend the stairs.

Not until then did the Sport glance toward his oddly-acting guest, and he frowned darkly as he caught that sneering, cynical smile.

"Didn't leave you another enigmatical warning against the mysterious unknown, did he, Cresson?"

"You heard, I reckon, didn't you?"

"Well, I heard enough to pretty well convince me the fellow is interested in something more than diamonds and other precious stones," was the dry response. "And you?"

"When did you first hear the fellow?" bluntly asked Cresson. "How long had he been outside?"

"Well, hardly long enough to have a broken back through a load of information he'll carry away," came the answer, after a barely perceptible hesitation. "I can't say how long he may have been out there, but his plea of searching for a lost stone falls mighty flat, don't you reckon?"

"That of course, although he pointed out the stone readily enough."

"Dropped for the occasion, doubtless, when you first touched the key. And—Well, he loves a pair of mighty light hoofs, for all his clumsy seeming!"

Chris Cresson resumed his seat on the edge of the bed, plucking at his neatly-trimmed beard, frowning blackly, looking like a man who is by no means wholly in love with himself or his recent actions.

That smile faded away from Firebrand's face as he sat watching his host, and his eyes seemed to grow more serious as well.

"It might have been worse, Mr. Cresson," he observed, when that silence had lasted for a minute or two. "I hardly think we uttered anything even an enemy could use as a weapon against us, those last few minutes."

"Then you really think he was playing spy upon us?"

"Doesn't it look that way?"

"But—what for? What interest can he have in my—in either of us?" asked the Crystal Sport, both tone and look seeming more sorely perplexed than at first.

Firebrand Dick frowned a bit, and his lips compressed almost fiercely. Only a brief glimpse it was, but if Chris Cresson had not been too deeply absorbed in puzzling out this fresh complication in his Deadwood experience, he might have gained a pretty accurate idea as to the sort of adversary that detective would prove when once thoroughly enlisted in man-hunt or finish-fight.

Apparently he saw nothing of this, however, and the revelation passed as swiftly as it showed itself. Then, in dry, indifferent tones, the man from Chicago said:

"You answer, pardner, for blamed if I know how!"

Chris Cresson frowned afresh, and his instinctive dislike for this cool customer gained a fresh impetus.

Not only was his tone flippant, but there was something far from soothing in the expression of his face, just then. Hardly an insult, and yet words would have stung less acutely, Cresson felt.

Still, he was not quite ready to break the truce under which he had brought this man to his room, and sitting in grim silence until he felt he could speak without too plainly flaming forth, the Sport finally broke the silence which had fallen over them both.

"Let the Sheeny pass for the present, then, Mr. Fyerband, and bark back to the explanation which I requested, first-off."

"Meaning my unceremonious leave-taking, out yonder in the hills?" asked the detective, with a fleeting smile at that recollection.

"Not exactly, although I may fetch that point up before finally bidding you farewell," coldly said the Sport, with a brief show of teeth.

"What I had reference to in particular was your actions at the Empire."

"Where I certainly served you to the best of my ability."

"With what ends in view, though? Didn't you admit that your purpose was to involve me still more deeply in your—in this scrape?"

"And by so admitting, I surely made my apology, sir."

"Well, hardly!" with a short, grim laugh, as their eyes met squarely. "Do you consider it an apology to tell another man you have deliberately played the fool in order to draw attention and dangerous suspicion from your shoulders to his?"

"Well, that puts a different face upon the case, I'm free to admit," came the answer, with more frankness than Cresson looked for. "And yet, if you are really the true, honest citizen I deem you—"

"I lay no claims to such distinction, Mr. Fyerband, and would prefer your sticking to facts, not drift off along the flowery path of empty compliments."

"The simple facts run like this: You not only played me dirt out yonder in the hills, when I was risking my life in trying to help an utter stranger out of an ugly hobble—"

"For which I ask your pardon now, as I've already craved it, sir."

"Wait, if you please," with a wave of his hand which declined the member extended by the detective. "You not only did this, which I might agree to overlook on your explanation, but—"

"Then why refuse to accept my later explanation, sir?"

"Have you made one, then?"

"I surely thought so, but if you're not content, I see nothing to hinder my repeating: In turning suspicion your way, I not only muddled the enemy more thoroughly, but I stood a fair chance of winning a valuable ally over to my side the dead-line. See?"

With admirable coolness the detective put in this plea, and his face wore such a bland expression of innocent complacency that Chris Cresson smiled in place of frowning.

"Well, of all cool customers!"

"Part of the paraphernalia, my dear fellow," laughingly declared the detective, but sobering up as swiftly, leaning a bit forward to gently tap his host on a knee while adding: "May I speak further, and without disguise, Mr. Cresson? May I tell you just why I was so anxious to win a solid backer out here?"

"Why not? Seems to me I've been trying to get at something very much like that."

"Then we both ought to have sufficient patience for the explanation," lightly commented the detective, leaning back once more, and passing a none too clean hand over his bristling beard.

With the light of the candle falling fairly across his face, that disguise was even more than ever visible, and Cresson felt a renewal of his curiosity on that point: since the detective found it necessary to disguise himself at all, why do so in such a manner as to invite rather than repel suspicion?

"I'm pretty nigh as anxious to explain as you are to hear, Mr. Cresson," began the detective, speaking slowly and in lowered tones, like one who has taken full warning by that evident attempt to play eavesdropper. "I know you can be of great service to me, if you only will—"

"That depends pretty much on what excuses you can offer."

"One excuse is a burning desire to bring a hardened criminal to the bar of justice, and at the same time to remove a foul blot from the memory of one who I firmly believe was innocent in life, as in death!"

"And that criminal is—whom?"

"Yet to be discovered, of course," with a swift alteration of tone and manner. "Back in a big city—well, call it Chicago, to localize matters—there was a firm doing an enormous business in diamonds and other precious stones. This in connection with a general jewelry business, of course, you understand?"

Chris Cresson nodded assent, but said nothing. His face seemed paler than usual, or else it was the angle at which the light fell across it that gave the impression.

If Richard Fyerband noticed this change of color, he gave no signs. His own eyes seemed downcast, and as he altered his position, leaning an elbow on the edge of the washstand, hand supporting his head, his own features were cast into shadow.

"Well, where a business is so extensive as the one I'm speaking of, at times there must be property of enormous value under its roof. So it was with this firm, and while every possible precaution was taken to guard against robbery, open or covert, the time finally came when a big haul was made."

"The establishment was robbed, then?"

"So the papers stated, and so everything looked on the surface, at first. One thing is beyond dispute: diamonds and a number of valuable rubies were missing, and their cost price ran very nearly up to a cool hundred thousand dollars!"

The detective broke off as though he anticipated an outburst of surprised interest at those figures, but none such came. Instead, Chris Cresson said, in lowered tones:

"And the robber? Who turned the trick?"

"That's where I never could quite agree with all the rest of our little world," frankly declared Fyerband, his eyes now fixed upon that pale face opposite himself. "The crime was quickly fixed upon a confidential clerk, or bookkeeper, or—well, I'm not exactly positive to this day just what manner of position the young man did hold."

"Go on. You were saying—?"

"That the proprietors, as well as the police pitched upon this confidential clerk as the one at the bottom of it all, but I can't make it seem that way! I know he was mixed up in the affair, but I believe he was far more sinned against than sinning!"

Chris Cresson leaned forward and grasped that hand, shaking it impulsively, at the same time speaking in husky, far from steady tones:

"Thank you for that, man! Thank you over and over, too!"

The detective gave a start at this action, but his fingers tightened upon that member, and his dark eyes glowed vividly as they gazed with keen intensity into that bearded face.

"You thank me, sir? And why? What for?" he asked slowly, meaningly.

A faint smile crept into that face as his eyes seemed trying to read the answer even before it could be shaped by tongue, and the Crystal Sport even gave a low, gentle laugh before making reply:

"Why thank you, is it, Fyerband? Because your words have blotted out an ugly belief I've always held; because your manner right now has removed an error I'll never fall into again."

"That is?"

"I always thought detectives were heartless bloodhounds in human shape, with no higher motive in life than to run criminals to earth, and never caring a curse whether or no those luckless devils were really in the wrong, just so they could manufacture proof sufficient to make them appear so in the jaundiced eyes of the law!"

Chris Cresson spoke with growing feeling, and so much so that the detective felt his recently-formed suspicions growing into almost conviction. And acting on this now belief, Firebrand Dick spoke:

"Did you ever hear of this Horwood affair before, Mr. Cresson?"

"I think so, yes," quietly admitted the Sport, meeting that keen gaze without flinching in the

slightest degree, although his face did seem a bit paler than ordinary.

"Did you ever meet this clerk, this Kenneth Horwood, then?" persisted the detective, still maintaining that firm grip on Cresson's hand.

"Yes, to that query, too, sir."

There was a brief pause after that admission, broken finally by the detective, who slowly asked:

"How did you escape death, Kenneth?"

"How did I—what are you trying to get at now, man alive?"

"What do I mean? *That you are Kenneth Horwood, and nobody else!*" came the swift, almost harsh accusation as Fyerband sprung to his feet.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE DIAMOND ROBBERY.

FIREBRAND DICK acted and looked as though he anticipated a violent outbreak on the part of the man whom he just then charged with being a criminal, but if such was his expectation, he was agreeably disappointed in the outcome.

In place of breaking away or making any move toward drawing a weapon to resist arrest, Chris Cresson never even attempted to free the hand which the detective was still tightly gripping.

Instead, he leaned back a bit, his face showing a half-mocking smile, and certainly there was no fear in his laughing eyes, no grave anxiety in his tones as he easily drawled:

"Sold again, pardner! Do I even *begin* to look like a moist, dank, fish-nibbled corpse, eh?"

"How did you know I meant *that* sort of death, then?" quickly asked the detective, by no means assured his suspicions had misled him so far.

An instant change came into the Sport's face, and wrestling his hand free with a sudden force, he said, sternly:

"Sit down, pardner. I'm not going to run away, and if you are really idiot enough to think of arresting me—"

"Then you have some reason to expect arrest, is it?"

"Not from any man of solid sense," with blunt carelessness as to how his shot might sting. "Still, if you are bent on writing yourself down an—ahem!—put it Dogberry, then!"

"When you can prove to me that you are not Kenneth Horwood, sir, I'll beg your pardon for both words and actions," a little stiffly began Detective Fyerband. "Until then I'll stick to my knitting, and run you in just as surely as though I had you on the most public street of Chicago, instead of out here in the wilderness, where a single yelp from a pinched hound is enough to fetch the entire bloodthirsty pack howling at an officer's heels!"

"Holy smokes! Will ye listen to *that*, now?" ejaculated the Crystal Sport, lifting his hands in mock awe. "All that, is it? And who dares to say sensation hasn't run mad when— Well, well, if I ever, no I never!"

A hot flush leaped into the detective's face, visible in spite of the hairy mask which so nearly covered his entire countenance. And as that low but merry laugh followed, his anger was by no means lessened.

The change came swiftly, and the laughing, mocking adventurer of one instant, the next moment was the grave, serious man of business.

"Enough of nonsense, Mr. Fyerband. I really couldn't help playing you joke for trick, but now—once more I sincerely thank you for the words you spoke a bit ago."

"I'll shake, when you prove that this isn't another of your little jests, as you call them, Kenneth Horwood," coldly said the detective.

"Are you in sober earnest in calling me by that name, sir?"

"Are you in sober earnest when you hint that it is *not* your rightful name, rather?"

"I am not Kenneth Horwood."

"You never passed by that name some two or three years ago?"

"I never did," came the instant response.

"You're barking up the wrong tree, pardner, if you really think I'm the fellow you name. I am not Kenneth Horwood. I never passed by that name. I never lived in the city of Chicago, nor was I ever a confidential clerk in an establishment where diamonds and other precious stones were made a commodity."

"Now, my dear sir, if this isn't explicit enough to satisfy any common hog, just give another grunt, and I'll tackle the problem again!"

Through all this the detective was keenly scrutinizing that handsome face, but he could find nothing therein to confirm his suspicions. Either this man was falsely charged, or else his nerve was fully equalled by his impudence.

"You are not—yet I could almost take oath to your face!"

"If by that you mean my face is the face of Kenneth Horwood, then you are mighty nigh perjur'ing yourself, pardner," came the quiet retort. "And so far as I know and believe, Kenneth Horwood is dead and in his grave."

Their eyes met steadily for the space of a few moments, at the end of which the detective re-

sumed his chair, a hand slipping into his bosom, from whence he produced a flat note-book.

A faint smile came over the face of the Sport as he saw that book come open, and he quietly said:

"I see you don't believe in toting all your eggs in one basket, Mr. Fyerband."

"How so?"

"Else that would hardly have escaped the fingers of Redmond, Johnson & Co. So far as I could see, lying under cover, they made a pretty thorough examination of yourself, out yonder."

"Exactly. But what I wanted was to show you this card," at the same time passing over a small-sized photograph, representing a young and handsome man, whose frank eyes seemed smiling upon the observer, and whose face, taken as a whole, certainly betrayed no evil characteristics such as one naturally expects to see in the face of a bold criminal.

"If you had a glass to hold up—so!"

As he uttered the words, Firebrand Dick held up a small pocket-mirror, so the Sport might compare his own face with that represented on the card.

"You really think there is a resemblance, then? I can't see it, for my part," calmly observed Cresson, after a leisurely inspection of the pictured face, varied by brief glances at his own comely reflection. "One consolation, at any rate: you're comparing me with a fine-looking lad!"

"And one who, with a few years added—for that full beard ages no little, to my thinking—might be mistaken for yourself by even a close relative, sir," gravely declared the detective.

"Which is about the same thing as saying you are not yet convinced I'm speaking the simple truth when I tell you I am not, never was, Kenneth Horwood."

"If not, you are his moral!"

"But I always understood young Horwood died?"

"Would it be the first instance of a pretended suicide, sir?"

"Of course not, and of all the men now living, I ought to be glad as the next one, if such a hope might come true!"

"Who are you, then, if not young Horwood?"

"Chris Cresson, the Crystal Sport," promptly came the answer, and with it the adventurer cast off all traces of emotion. "Now, pardner, if you are not convinced as yet, reckon you'd better run me in. That is, of course, unless I should take a sudden notion to play we don't!"

Firebrand Dick laughed softly at this characteristic ending, and he likewise appeared quite willing to resume their former off-hand tooting, for the time being.

"Well, reckon I'll let you run your rope a bit longer. If you are really my man, you'll try to give me the slip when I'm not looking, or else you'll down me for keeps to save yourself—if you can!"

"But as I'm not your man, all these ifs and ands fall to the ground, old fellow! Now—tell me something about this diamond robbery, will you, please?"

"I thought you knew young Horwood?"

"So I used, but that's no sign I'm thoroughly posted as to his later doings, either actual or supposed," came the cool retort. "In good truth, sir, I was not in America when that ugly affair came off—worse luck!"

"Why worse luck, if I may ask?"

"Because, if I had been within reach at the time, poor Kenneth would never have gone so far—would never have taken his life, at least."

There followed a brief pause, during which both men seemed busied with their own thoughts. Then Firebrand Dick abruptly spoke:

"You don't need for me to go over it all, then, Cresson?"

"Why not? Remember, I was not in the States, and even after my return from abroad, I somehow never had, or took, time to look up the papers giving the daily details."

"It makes a rather long story, but—"

"Boil it down, then, or merely touch upon the main points. Of course I know all about the young fellow, and have a pretty good general idea of the unfortunate affair; still, it may give me a bit of new light to have the case stated by other lips."

If he thought this a somewhat cool proceeding, Firebrand Dick gave no indication, but slowly began his account of the great diamond robbery.

"The firm of Hilton & Jarvis, as you know, then, had in their employ a bright, bustling, smart young fellow named Kenneth Horwood. I'm not so mighty sure just what position he filled, but confidential clerk comes near enough to the meaning, I reckon."

"I understand. Go on, please."

"And filling this position, mind you, young Horwood was free of all ordinary rules, so to speak; and when the right time came 'round, he had every chance in the world to get away with the boodle."

"Which he never attempted, as I'll go bail, sir!"

"Well, I've caught myself thinking pretty much that same way myself, since I was first placed in charge of the case," admitted the de-

tective, with a faint, peculiar smile wrinkling the corners of his eyes.

"Yet you can cast mud on the good name of a dead man!"

"The very best of us will make mistakes in the long run, sir, and for proof of that, you need look no further than to the date of the great Hilton & Jarvis diamond robbery. For right then and there Kenneth Horwood made the grand mistake of his whole life!"

Chris Cresson gave an impatient gesture, but said nothing, possibly because it seemed to him the detective was expecting another outbreak on his part, and was playing for just that mistake.

"All right. Faster suits me just as well. And right here you can begin catching plain facts by the armful!"

"The first hint of a big robbery came one Monday morning, when the janitor opened the store for the purpose of sweeping out, and getting matters in trim, as customary. For he found Kenneth Horwood lying on the floor near the great safe, just inside the fireproof vault which contained the burglar proof affair."

"Naturally enough, the janitor was frightened half out of his wits, for he thought he'd stumbled over a graveyard for certain, and the first thing he did was to give a howl of horror, then run out of the store for help."

"When a couple of policeman came in, they found Kenneth Horwood, seemingly half-dead from hunger, thirst, fright, and somehinted, remorse; anyway, he was in a pretty bad way when the gag was cut away from his mouth, and the bonds taken from his limbs."

"His story was quickly told, however, for as the partners came in a rush at the first alarm, to find their safe opened and robbed—of a vast amount in diamonds and precious stones, it was rumored—they gave young Horwood mighty little peace until he'd told it all."

"Kenneth always swore he'd been victimized, as I heard the story."

"Yes, that's what he maintained throughout the whole affair," admitted the detective. "He swore by all mankind holds holy that he had been acting for what he deemed the best interests of his employers, but that he had been shamefully deceived and betrayed to his undoing."

"The story, as he told it, runs something like this: He formed the acquaintance of a gentleman and a lady—his wife, as the introduction made out—at the hotel where he roomed. And as they quickly grew more intimate, the plot was finally hatched."

"The couple were very wealthy, and had a passion for diamonds. They were thinking of making a heavy investment in precious stones, and had about concluded to favor Horwood's firm with the order, when, after dusk on Saturday, they received a cablegram calling them to England without delay."

"This they told Kenneth at the dinner table, and on his lamenting the loss of their custom, in addition to their pleasant acquaintance, the woman wondered why they could not effect a trade, even then?"

"They were to start East on the midnight train. Both Hilton and Jarvis had gone to their suburban homes to remain over Sunday. And then it was that the trap sprang, according to the young fellow."

"To cut it short, the married couple proposed going to the store with him, there to inspect and select the stones they desired. These could be laid aside until they remitted the price, when the diamonds could be sent to whatever address they might send."

"Kenneth was wrong and foolish, of course," soberly said the Sport, as the detective paused for breath at this juncture. "Still, I hold perfect faith in the lad; he was blinded by a woman's cunning wiles, and—"

"How well you've got hold of his plea!" ejaculated Firebrand Dick, in real or admirably affected surprise.

"Because I believed it *then*, and never more entirely than I believe it *now* that he lies in his dishonored grave!"

"Are you so mighty certain he *does* fill that grave, Cresson?"

"What!" with a start and sudden paling of face. "How can you even affect to doubt *that* much, man alive?"

CHAPTER XVII.

FIGHTING FOR DEAR LIFE.

IT all happened so suddenly that Morris Rosenblatt, the diamond-dealer, was taken utterly off his guard, and before he could really divine what peril menaced him, a heavy mutter was twisted tightly about his head and the ends doubled at his throat so viciously that suffocation became imminent, and an outcry was among the impossibilities, fight as desperately as he might.

Each limb appeared to have its particular guardian just then, and muscular fingers seemed gripping every practicable hand-hold on his person, one and all of them working in perfect concert, all pushing or hauling or carrying him forward to—what?

With all this coming upon him just when all seemed working well for himself, with all around him quiet and peaceable, with not even

the tiniest cloud in sight to herald the coming storm; it would have been strange indeed had Morris Rosenblatt not lost his head for the moment.

He struggled with his utmost power, trying not only to break away from those many hands—in his wild excitement they seemed scores, at the very lowest computation—but to shout aloud for aid, knowing that among so many persons there surely were enough honest souls to effect a rescue.

Every nerve and every muscle was called into play, and his lungs seemed on the point of bursting with his tremendous efforts. If he could only free his throat long enough to utter even one shout for assistance!

To his excited brain it seemed as though an age was spent in that fruitless attempt, but in reality less than a single minute sufficed for the bold abductors to overpower their appointed prey, and to hustle him across the floor of the saloon, where all was noise of confusion worse confounded; where men were yelling and cursing with mingled rage and terror as all struggled for the exit—anything to get out of that utter darkness where death might be lurking, ready to strike home at any instant.

And, bewildered though he naturally was, Morris Rosenblatt knew that his unseen, unknown assailants had forced him to the wall, and then out through an opening of some sort: how could it be a door, when he felt morally certain that they had been fighting away from, rather than toward the front entrance?

The pressure upon him became terrible when that exit was attempted, and the change of grip which his captors were obliged to make in order to pass through at all, more than anything else, told the diamond-dealer that they were leaving the Empire proper.

And yet—surely their feet were still upon a board flooring?

Even then, while fighting as only a strong, thoroughly desperate man can fight for an endangered life, Morris Rosenblatt had room for such a thought; and with it came the ugly suspicion that yonder black-eyed beauty surely had something to do with this outrage?

Then came another jam, lasting for a briefer space than the first, and an instant later Rosenblatt felt his feet strike solid earth.

Yet it was little more than instinct that told him of these changes, as made. Eyesight was denied him. His limbs were so fiercely hampered that they could do little more than what they were forced by the enemy.

Worse than all else, that suffocating muffler was still about his face, added to by a savage grip about his throat: a noose of some sort, as it seemed. And his brain was beginning to whirl and dance and throb as no thoroughly sane brain was ever known to do.

Now that there was more space in which to do their work, the gang evidently found less difficulty in handling their prize, whose struggles were growing less fierce as suffocation lessened his strength.

The diamond-dealer was lifted clear of his feet, and then carried off through the night at a rapid pace, as though those committing the outrage had good cause for fearing punishment, unless they could reach a secure covert before the alarm could spread, or the bewildered crowd win fairly clear of the darkened Empire.

How long that rush lasted, or how far he was carried, Morris Rosenblatt had no means of determining. He was losing his senses through the horrible smothering caused by that cursed muffler, and—

A sudden jar shook him sharply, and his wits seemed to take a brightened spurt through that same impetus, for he caught the sound of a human voice, although he could not distinguish the words spoken.

He rallied his powers for a final struggle, and lurching heavily as he tried to shake off that suffocating weight covering head and neck, the diamond-dealer felt much like a strangling swimmer whose head has just come above the surface to pure air.

The muffler was loosened, and that unknown to his enemies, for their number had been greatly lessened since leaving the saloon where that bold capture had been effected.

Morris Rosenblatt caught a single glorious breath of cool, pure air, that filled his lungs with the sweetest draught he had ever tasted, and at the same instant he heard a low, hoarse voice utter:

"Kill him if he makes a break, for—"

Strong hands were touching him, moving as though in search of something hidden; or else, it might be, meaning to make still surer of their game by pinning his limbs before going any further.

The diamond-dealer did not stop to learn just which was being attempted, but made another struggle to break away from the ruffians, greatly strengthened by the partial liberty he had already gained.

As he strove thus, one of his hands broke away, and his fingers felt something cold and hard as they struck against the person of one of his assailants.

Recognition was instantaneous, and with a fierce muffled cry, Morris Rosenblatt gripped

that knife-bilt, jerking blade from sheath and making a blind stroke with all the power left his partially benumbed arm!

He felt the weapon strike home, and a sharp, vicious cry burst from the lips of the wounded man.

"Hell fire! I'm out! Kill—don't let—kill him, I

The diamond-dealer felt the harsh grip slacken, and making another blind lunge with his knife, he strove to break entirely away—and succeeded!

Staggering, reeling, he flung off that heavy muffler, and caught the night-lights just in time to glimpse one of his enemies falling back and down, but at the same time jerking forth a pistol whose angry flame flared out as its owner fell prostrate!

Morris Rosenblatt reeled afresh, for something seemed to hit him full in the chest with cruel force, knocking the breath out of his lungs, and following itself up with a spear of scorching flame—no less than that would describe the horrible sensation.

Staggering, the diamond-dealer lifted his voice in a wild shout for help, straining his lungs as it seemed to him, and yet his ears could barely distinguish the sound of his own voice!

At the same instant his right hand—his left had gripped the knife-bilt—caught at a revolver which he wore concealed from casual observation, and sighting a lusty knave who was in the act of leaping upon him with a flashing blade, Rosenblatt fired once, twice, thrice!

All this takes time to record, and time to realize; yet it all happened within the brief space of two ordinary breaths.

The gasp of fresh air, the ugly menace, the blow and the break-away; the cry and fall of the stabbed rascal, his shot for revenge, the rush of the second abductor, and then those shots; all following each other with such rapidity that they might be called simultaneous action.

And then, with a faint, dizzy sense of seeing his second enemy fling up his armed hand, to fall backward in a limp and nerveless heap, Morris Rosenblatt staggered off, still clinging to his weapons, but feeling himself too badly injured to make effectual use of them.

It was purely instinctive on his part, this action.

He knew not how many more of the evil gang might be aiming at his life right then and there. He had a dim, sleepy sense of others—or had they fallen off before—what had happened, after all?

His brain seemed swimming on a blood-red sea where he was being tossed up and down, swaying, swinging, now slowly, now so rapidly that it made him catch his breath and—why was he turning so ill? Why did he stagger and reel as though—surely the ground was swaying and heaving like uneasy billows before a rising wind?

Or—had he been drinking too much? Was this drunkenness, in a new shape?

These, and even wilder fancies assailed the diamond-dealer as he reeled onward through the night, hearing yet not understanding the alarm which was spreading rapidly behind him, where men had been startled by those shots and that fierce yell of angry pain, coupled with that hoarse appeal for rescue.

That burning pain which followed so closely after the numbing blow of the bullet, had almost died away by now, but as he reeled dizzily onward through the night, Morris Rosenblatt gradually arrived at the truth; he was dangerously wounded, and unless he could find assistance ere long, he must surely succumb!

"Help—where? Who will—how can—"

His foot struck a stone lying in his way, and the greatly weakened diamond-dealer fell heavily forward, one hand and arm doubling under him, but without the power to support his weight, or to materially break the force of his fall.

It was his left arm, and in that hand was still gripped the knife which had so strangely come into his possession. Fortunately the point was buried in the hard earth, else the end of that desperate fight for life against long odds might have ended right there.

Instead, the warm blood wet that hand, and helped restore those bewildered wits to something of their usual clearness.

From the rear came loud, excited cries, and not knowing how many of them might be raised by his unknown enemies, the wounded man no longer thought of calling aloud for assistance, but lifting his head to gaze around, he quickly made out his immediate surroundings.

In that blind, unreasoning retreat from his assailants, Morris Rosenblatt had passed away from rather than toward the more thickly-settled portion of Deadwood, and was now almost at its extreme edge, where the buildings were little better than huts and shanties, and even they but scattered at wide intervals.

Yet, as he rose unsteadily to his feet and moved on, it was still in that same direction, without thought of seeking aid in the town proper.

That awful dizziness came back to the wounded man as he exerted himself, and all was dim-

mer than the gloom of night would account for.

And still, despite all this, Morris Rosenblatt passed by at least two occupied buildings, to stagger much further before reeling up to the front of a third—poor, small, rudely constructed, yet the very haven toward which his hopes and longings had turned ever since he could fairly realize what had befallen him.

A dim light shone through the single window in the front of the cabin, and thus guided, the diamond-dealer gained the doorstep. He even lifted a hand with which to appeal for admission, but before he could strike, the door swung open and the tall, gaunt figure of a man stood revealed in the opening.

A gasping, choking cry, then Morris Rosenblatt sunk limply down on that rough stone which served as a doorstep, his face touching the foot of that man before it could be drawn back, as it was the next instant.

"Great Scott!" ejaculated the tall man, shrinking back, yet with eye seemingly fascinated by that corpse-like vision. "What in the name of time has— Eh?"

Rosenblatt lifted his head a bit, gasping faintly:

"Help—hide—save, for love—of Heaven!"

Again his head drooped, but his appeal had been heard by one who, if only by virtue of her sex, would never permit it to pass unheeded.

"Quick, father!" and a trim, neatly-garbed figure sprang to his assistance. "Help me—inside, and shut the door before any one can see!"

Even as she spoke, Agnes Dempster was bending over the injured man, and slipping her brown little hands under his shoulders, she essayed to lift him inside the cabin.

Left to himself, it is doubtful whether Saul Dempster would not have paused to ask more questions than one before taking in a stranger who made application under such unusual if not actually suspicious circumstances; but Agnes, as her father often remarked in loving jest, ruled him as with a rod of iron, and what she said went without question.

So it was on this occasion, for Saul gently pushed Agnes aside, and raising that nerveless form in his sinewy arms, bore the diamond-dealer across the threshold, crisply speaking:

"Close and bar, Aggie, girl!"

The daughter quickly acted upon this hint, and by the time that was done, Saul Dempster had placed his burden upon a narrow bed near the rear of the room, and drawing back a bit, was staring at—what?

That heavy gray beard had partly fallen away from Rosenblatt's face, proving beyond the possibility of a doubt that he wore a disguise!

CHAPTER XVIII. DEAD OR LIVING?

CHRIS CRESSON certainly appeared intensely earnest while expressing his amazement thus, but Firebrand Dick smiled faintly, his keen eyes partially veiling themselves as he looked across at that handsome face.

"Well, sir, of course I can't show you proof positive—as yet, I mean—that Kenneth Horwood is still in the land of the living, but, all the same, I more than half believe he is still living."

"Impossible, sir!"

"Do you say so? Then I wonder what you'd think were I to add: I believe him alive, and I believe he is not a dozen miles away from this very chamber to-night!"

Cresson stared with wide eyes into the detective's face, but then, as he fancied he read the covert meaning underlying those deliberately spoken words, his lips curled and he scoffingly said:

"Still harping on that string, pardner? Well, only a fool or a knave himself would even indirectly charge a gentleman with lying, unless he had both proofs and sand to back up his opinion, according to rule."

"Meaning that you are not Kenneth? Well, am I saying you are he?"

"Isn't that what you mean?"

"Not necessarily," came the cool retort. "But suppose you permit me to reach the rack by following my own path?"

"All right. Go ahead, Mister Man," said the Sport, resuming his former careless attitude, yet watching his guest with suspicious keenness.

"As you probably are aware, Mr. Cresson, suspicion turned strongly upon Kenneth Horwood, in spite of the fairly plausible tale he told; one which had no little in it to back him up, too!"

"Proof enough, surely, to spare him from a suicidal grave!" muttered Crystal Chris, with frowning brows and darkened visage.

"Just so. And yet—but let me run over the facts, as they showed in his account, and on the other side of the line as well.

"Horwood swore that he had taken his two customers to the store, and for their gratification, and to make their choice of gems, had opened the vault and the safe inside. Then he was struck down by a blow from behind, and when his consciousness returned, the two crooks were just completing the robbery.

"That part of his story relating to the couple whose acquaintance he formed at his hotel,

proved correct. So, too, was their departure on the evening of the robbery; but instead of leaving for the east, on the midnight train, they went west, at six o'clock. See the point?"

"To leave at the first station, and return, of course."

"So young Horwood reasoned while trying to explain all to the satisfaction of his employers," admitted the detective, but with a half-malicious twinkle in his dark eyes. "Odd, isn't it, how two minds will sometimes run along the same channel?"

"Not so odd when you consider that both minds belong to honest men," came the swift retort. "Still, it may puzzle you to understand."

"Score one, and I'm not kicking against the pricks, Mr. Cresson," the detective lightly answered. "But business is business, and time is rolling along, regardless!"

"To hark back, then: Horwood's employers were not satisfied with his explanation, although they deferred placing him under arrest, no doubt hoping to catch him tripping, and maybe trap his confederates through some rash attempt on his part to renew communication."

"Nothing of this sort took place, however, and as the hottest search failed to find anything of the stranger couple, it was about decided to serve the warrant (which had been sworn out almost immediately after the robbery was discovered) on young Horwood, when he took matters into his own hands and sprung another sensation upon the public."

"When the officers went to serve that warrant, Kenneth Horwood was gone!"

"Whither?"

"To meet his death by drowning, his note of explanation said."

"And that note surely told the truth," said Chris Cresson, half-defiantly, yet with tones softened materially by undisguised sorrow.

"So nearly every one of his acquaintances thought, and so even his most bitter enemies were forced to think when what purported to be the body of Kenneth Horwood was fished up out of the lake."

"It surely was his body! How can you doubt it, man?"

"It's not my story I'm telling, Mr. Cresson, but that of Kenneth Horwood," quietly answered the detective, then adding, before the Crystal Sport could chip again:

"That corpse was identified, although the fishes had been at work before its recovery. That corpse was buried, and the record made was that Kenneth Horwood, of such an age, lay interred at such and such a place."

"Where his bones are lying to this day, poor lad!"

"Wait, please. The body was identified, I say, but it was not until some time after the burial that some person was heard wondering why no description was given by any of the papers of that peculiar scar."

Chris Cresson as though involuntarily lifted a hand to press it over his left breast, and as he caught that motion, the detective smiled blandly, leaning forward a bit he asked:

"Can you tell what sort of a scar it was, Mr. Cresson? Can you even mention what part of his body that scar marred?"

A hot flush swept over the face of the Crystal Sport, and his hand quickly dropped away. But he met that bland gaze without flinching, and his tones held never a quiver as he answered:

"Yes, to both of your queries, Firebrand Dick. Why not, when it was my hand gave the hurt that caused that scar?"

"Is that so?"

"That is even so, sir," with an access of hauteur in both face and tones. "The scar formed a small red crescent, right here," tapping his breast, almost directly over the heart.

"And you inflicted the wound—may I ask how, sir?"

"I've nothing whatever to conceal, although your eyes and your tones are plainly insinuating as much, Firebrand, and so—here you have it! That hurt was inflicted when Kenneth Horwood and myself were schoolboys together."

"Never mind just where we both lived at the time. Not in Chicago, though, for, as I said before, I never made my home in that city. But we were friends, and none the less warm chums after that hurt was inflicted by a careless hand."

"Do you seriously object to state just how young Horwood got hurt, Mr. Cresson?"

"What makes you think I might have such an objection?"

"Nothing, unless it is you're a mighty long while getting around to the explanation," retorted the detective, with a short laugh.

"If that is all, I'll remove your doubts in short order, Richard," his tones likewise lightening considerably. "It all happened one day when we were in swimming, Kenneth and I by no means the least jolly of that gay young crowd."

"There were mussel-shells in abundance on the sand-bar, and I was skipping some of these, when one took a sudden curve and cut a deep gash in Kenneth's left breast."

"I was scared far worse than he was hurt,

for the wound bled very freely, and I remember begging him not to tell my parents. My father was very stern and very passionate, and I knew he'd flog me severely in case he should learn of the hurt. And so—well, Kenneth and I decided to keep it a profound secret, and do the healing ourselves."

"I'm telling you all this, sir, mainly to explain why a wound so comparatively slight should have caused a scar so deep and permanent. Of course neither of us had a diploma as physician or surgeon, and—well, the result was just that: a deep, red scar, which would last even longer than life!"

Swift as light the detective caught at that final expression.

"Longer than life, you say? Then tell me—what had become of that scar when I closely examined the body which was buried for that of Kenneth Horwood?"

"Do you really mean that, sir?" asked Cresson, his face showing unusually pale as he leaned a bit forward to meet that piercing gaze.

"I mean precisely that, Mr. Cresson," came the grave response. "I repeat that I saw the corpse, and it bore no such scar as you have described."

"Its color may have faded in death—of course it would!"

"But the scar couldn't have faded entirely away, think?"

"Of course not, but—the fishes had been at work," his voice lowering a bit more, and growing husky with suppressed emotions.

Firebrand Dick shook his head in dogged negation. Even that excuse would not be accepted by this human bloodhound.

"I'm free to admit that the corpse was marred by the work of time and fishes, but, as luck would have it, neither breast had been touched, and even the skin was unbroken when I made that examination."

"Yet even so keen a bloodhound as yourself might have made an error, or been deceived by your memory. Didn't you say the corpse had long been buried before mention was made of any such scar?"

"Not so long; less than a couple of weeks, Mr. Cresson."

"Long enough to give solid grounds for my belief, though."

"Or would be, but for a single fact," with a faint smile showing in spite of his disguising beard. "And that fact is this: the proper authorities caused that grave to be opened, and the corpse exhumed. And I can now make solemn oath to what I now aver: that scar was not on the body!"

Chris Cresson shrunk back, seemingly awed or shocked to silence, but Firebrand Dick quickly added the words:

"I hold it was all a cunning trick. I believe Kenneth Horwood is right here in the Black Hills, if not in Deadwood itself!"

"Well, what are you going to do about it, pardner?"

All in an instant the Crystal Sport changed his manner, and from one who shrunk back from that piercing gaze almost as a convicted criminal might, he seemed once more the careless, jaunty "Glimmer-glass" who had taken Deadwood by storm.

Firebrand Dick plainly did not relish this alteration, or the dark frown which flashed across his visage belied itself; but he likewise as swiftly rallied, to speak in pretty much the same sort of tones:

"Well, of course that pretty much depends, Glimmer-glass. As a sworn officer of the law, it is my bounden duty to make the arrest of—"

"First catch your hare!" softly hummed the Crystal Sport.

"Of course that comes first, but when you can see a bit of quivering fur at the end of a shallow hollow in a tree—eh?"

"I remember one time when I was rabbit hunting and a shallow hollow yielded me up a—I can smell it even yet!"

But if Firebrand Dick was expected to laugh over this bit of boyish experience, Chris Cresson was disappointed. The detective had been in harness far too long for leading astray on a false scent, and dismissing that frivolous by-path with a wave of the hand, he spoke gravely:

"It's exactly as I told you, Mr. Cresson. I believe Kenneth Horwood is still in the land of the living, and this belief of mine has brought me clear out here to Deadwood. I firmly believe he is in this town this very night!"

"Impossible!" ejaculated Cresson, very pale, but showing no other signs of agitation. "I'll never believe that, Fyerband!"

"If I arrest him, and call on you to identify that scar, will you?"

"I'd kill you before you had time to pronounce his name!"

CHAPTER XIX.

DIAMOND DELL, THE CONFIDENCE QUEEN.

In slow, deadly tones came those words, and the only attempt Chris Cresson made to lend them emphasis other than they carried on their face, was by a gentle wave of his right forefinger.

Firebrand Dick sat smiling faintly, his dark eyes held by those chestnut orbs; and he, too, seemed cool as though naught more dangerous than milk-and-water compliments were being interchanged.

"Do you really mean all that, Mr. Cresson?"

"Better take my word for it, sir. There'll be no time left for asking the question or digesting the answer—then!"

"That sounds as though you actually meant it all, too!"

"So thoroughly do I mean it, sir, that if I'm anywhere within sight when you attempt to make such an arrest, I'll lay you out for the sexton before your lips can finish pronouncing his name, or the devilishly false charge against him!"

Still in that subdued, gently modulated tone, and without more than the usual tinge of color to his handsome face; yet one hearing the Crystal Sport just then would have made affidavit he meant each and every word that passed his lips.

None could better appreciate this than Richard Fyerband, but instead of flinching or of showing anger against the threatener, he looked pleased, if anything, and his voice held a slight drawl as he spoke again:

"All that, yet you have been declaring your firm belief in Horwood's death! Isn't that fighting windmills, Mr. Cresson?"

"You set me the example, surely," with a slight bow. "You spoke of arresting Kenneth Horwood, and asked me if I'd help you in clinching the shackles. I told you what I'd do, instead. But since the poor lad is dead and turning to dust, we're both chewing wind to mighty poor profit."

"It seems we're bound to differ clean through, my dear sir," placidly uttered the detective. "Instead of wasting my time, as you more than hint, I consider it very well improved, if only through showing me what a true friend and stout backer you are."

"Must I bow in acknowledgment, Mr. Firebrand?"

"Not unless you are really anxious to take up the little time we have left. I had no intention of flattering you, be sure; if anything along that line, 'twas toward myself for having so correctly summed up your character."

Chris Cresson frowned a bit at this. Although the detective hardly seemed sneering or making a jest of his host, yet it was no easy task to interpret his words differently.

For once in a way, the Crystal Sport felt himself at a loss what to think or just how to express himself. This man from the Lake City was proving himself an enigma not easily solved.

"I'm taking no credit to myself, and least of all would I accept it from one like you, since you declare yourself hunting down an unfortunate lad whose worst enemy stood inside his own skin."

"As for showing myself a true friend and stout backer, I only wish I might have had a chance while Kenneth—Drop it, will you?"

Harshly, almost savagely those final words came, but Firebrand Dick was not yet ready to act upon them, and quickly said:

"Help me prove Kenneth Horwood living, Cresson, and I'll give you just that chance to show your perfect faith to all the world!"

There was a brief silence after this earnest speech, during which the eyes of the two men met and seemed trying to explore the depths lying beyond. Then Chris Cresson spoke in measured tones:

"I've already taken a solemn oath, Mr. Fyerband, to make all the world see Kenneth Horwood as I, his friend and one-time schoolmate, have seen him through all this sad affair. I've taken a vow to never give over until I've made his perfect innocence clear as the light of day!"

"If so, and it may even be that you are right, you've come to the right quarter of the globe to clasp hand upon the prime criminals, Mr. Cresson," gravely asserted the detective, apparently resolved upon casting aside all evasions and subterfuges now that he saw a fair opening for getting down to solid business.

The Crystal Sport smiled faintly, but showed very little elation at this. Possibly he considered his own judgment fully as valuable as that of the more or less celebrated detective.

"Is that so?" he murmured, almost languidly.

"I really think as much. Unless all my reasoning has gone wrong, you are now at the right spot to begin that work of clearing away all doubts as to who really committed that diamond robbery."

"Of course you have no doubt, after what you said concerning young Horwood."

"None at all as to his being mixed up in the affair, but as to his being a willing participant—well, that's a gray horse of another color, don't you see?"

With an affected yawn of weariness, the Crystal Sport leaned back on one elbow. Firebrand Dick smiled at this silent protest, but showed no signs of dropping the subject, or of cutting his visit short.

"Keeping you too long, am I? Well, don't

forget that you rather urgently invited me up here, and—"

"So brought far worse upon my poor, fool's head!"

"Not if you are really in earnest about clearing the memory of Kenneth Horwood from this stain, sir," with sudden access of earnestness. "For I believe I can give you information leading toward that end, which you might spend years in hunting after, yet never find it then!"

"Are you in earnest now, Mr. Fyerband?"

"Never more so in my life, Mr. Cresson."

The Sport moved uneasily on the edge of his bed, and all his nerve seemed powerless to hinder that betrayal of excitement, if not of something still deeper. Yet he strove to conceal this self-betrayal by hurriedly saying:

"Prove that to me, sir, and I'll not only wipe off all scores against you, but consider myself deeply indebted. Only it comes mighty hard to climb over all old prejudices!"

"One of which is that no good can come out of—Pinkertonia!" the detective laughingly said, but adding before his host could agree or dissent: "Well, possibly I may be able to help you over that awkward stile, too—who knows?"

"Now, let me tell you one reason for my coming to this part of our wonderful country: I'm on a woman hunt, old and world-worn though you behold me! And that woman one of the most charming, most bewitching, most captivating of all her sex!"

"You're meaning double, I take it, pardner?"

"Which shows how level your head is on top, Christopher! Yet each and every word goes, all the same, single sense or double. Diamond Dell is 'way up for beauty and witchery as a woman, and when it comes to using these words in connection with her operations as confidence queen—go hide your beads, all other sirens!"

"And you think this Diamond Dell, as you term her, and the woman Horwood spoke of, are one and the same?"

"Unless they are, then my hope and your assurance as to his innocence of actual guilt—of aught worse than carelessness—falls to the ground, and we haven't got a leg left to stand on," coolly declared Firebrand Dick, yet, with all his outward carelessness, maintaining a keen if covert watch upon his opposite.

"Isn't it rather late in the day to take up a new trail, though? From your manner of speaking about this Diamond Dell, I judge that she is a well-known character, and so—"

"Known better through fame than by face, form, or conviction, worse luck!" cut in the detective, with an irritable gesture to match his sudden frown. "Although it's morally certain that a more dangerous woman never entered the army of crooks, and although at least a dozen heavy operations in the precious-stone line all point in her direction, Diamond Dell has never been arrested, and her lovely phiz is yet to ornament the rogues' gallery."

"What makes you think she had a hand in that affair, then?"

"I've picked up a stray bit or two—we human hounds have ways and means peculiar to ourselves, of course," with a brief chuckle. "And while there is no actual record to show that the confidence queen was in Chicago on that particular date, I am morally certain she was, and that the woman Kenneth Horwood mentioned was none other than Diamond Dell."

Chris Cresson gave a slight start at this, and his lips parted as though to speak. But they closed again in silence, and apparently without noticing this change of purpose, the detective continued:

"When we have more time on hand, I'll tell you something concerning this beauty—for beauty she surely is, despite her ugly record! But just at present—what do you think of the Empress Josephine, Cresson?"

The Sport gave another start, and plainly changed color at this sudden shot, although he must have been in a measure prepared for something of that sort.

"What! You surely can't mean that she is Diamond Dell?"

Firebrand Dick gave a low, amused, yet grimly-sounding chuckle before answering this exclamation, which he did after his own fashion.

"Well, young gentleman, just you whisper that name into her shell-like ear, and see what the Empress will say—or do!"

"And—you really think—"

"That on second thought, though, I'd advise you to put on a bullet-and-knife-proof overcoat before giving that whisper."

"Would she use her knife, do you think?"

"It wouldn't be the first time, else her record lies," came the blunt answer. "I haven't run it clean back to her debut, but Diamond Dell has a private graveyard, and at least three mounds therein to her greater or less credit."

"The Empress—Jo St. John—with such an ugly record!" muttered Cresson, his eyes staring at vacancy, his brows gathered in a frown which Firebrand Dick took considerable interest in studying from under cover of his light-shading hand. "It seems incredible, but if true—I say, pardner!" abruptly rousing himself.

"What is it, friend?"

"You declared your belief that Kenneth Horwood was still alive, and right here in Deadwood. Now—on what grounds do you base that belief, Firebrand?"

Chris Cresson put that query with an interest which was only thinly veiled, leaning forward with gaze riveted upon that hair-masked face opposite, as though he would read the truth in spite of mask or subterfuges.

But before an answer could be given, even had the detective been both ready and willing to lay bare his professional secrets, an interruption came which caused the Crystal Sport to spring from bed to floor, and at his second swift stride reach the one narrow window with which his bedchamber was supplied.

From down-town there came the rattle of fire-arms, and mingling with those explosions could be distinguished sharp, fierce cries, even before the Sport's ready hands unfastened and flung up that window-sash.

Without giving a thought to the peril which he might thus be running, after his racket with the Redmond gang, Cresson listened to those warlike sounds for a few moments, then turned his head to speak to the detective—only to start so sharply the sash fell with a crash.

For he alone occupied the room. Firebrand had vanished!

CHAPTER XX.

THE CRYSTAL SPORT SURPRISED.

CHRIS CRESSON stared about him like one in a walking dream, unable to comprehend how that vanishment had been effected so swiftly, so silently, and without leaving a single sign behind to tell how the trick had been turned.

Twice over did his startled eyes sweep all around those four narrow walls before he could trust them; and then, with almost ludicrous haste he squatted down, hand on pistol to peer into the gloomy space beneath his narrow bed!

Nothing was to be found under there more formidable than dirt and cobwebs, however, and then, fully convinced that Firebrand Dick had actually escaped from the chamber by way of the door, Cresson caught the knob and gave it a wrench—yes!

He distinctly remembered locking the door after his odd interview with the diamond-dealer, and how the key had been turned.

Of course the detective must have done it, but how that could be, and the door both opened and closed again, without the slightest sound coming to warn him, passed the Sport's comprehension.

Flinging wide the door, he sprang forth into the hall, bending head and guarding face like one who more than anticipates an assault without further warning, and at the same time gripping pistol ready for a shot or a blow.

Neither came, and as he flashed a keen, angry glance along that narrow passageway, the Crystal Sport failed to detect aught to explain the new sensation; if Firebrand Dick had actually made his escape in that direction, it was perfected before the Sport sprang forth from his bedchamber.

"I say, pardner!" he called forth, at first softly, then a bit louder, until he knew that any one on the same floor, if awake and in full possession of their senses, could not have avoided hearing him.

With this as a further proof that Firebrand Dick really meant to give him "the dirty shake," Cresson returned to his room, and again lifting that sash, paused for a brief space in listening.

Beyond a doubt there was something out of the ordinary run taking place in town, and that at no extreme distance from the Midland. The firing had ceased, but he could hear an ominous humming sound, mingled now and then with a cry or a yell; sounds which, finding birth in a live and lively mining-town such as Deadwood was at that date, tell an "old hand" far more than any such uproar in a more civilized section.

"A circus of some sort, and I wouldn't wonder if the fellow's took a prance down that way," mused the Crystal Sport as he drew in his head and lowered the sash. "Well, why not?"

This answered a question born only in his busy brain, and without stopping to count the possible consequences, Chris Cresson blew out his candle and left his room, locking the door and taking its key with him.

Almost any other man, after a similar experience at the Empire, would have thought at least twice before hastening directly toward that same place; but the alarm came from that direction, and Cresson never gave a second thought to the likelihood of again coming into contact with the Redmond-Watkins gang.

The instant his feet struck the street, Crystal Chris looked swiftly around in search of Firebrand Dick, but though he caught a fleeting glimpse of a couple shapes, flitting rapidly along in the direction of that row, neither of them appeared to be the detective, and without wasting more time, he also broke into a swinging trot, his interest in yonder "circus" growing the plainer he caught the sounds.

"If he isn't there now, he will be," were some of the thoughts that flashed across his brain while hastening onward through the night. "You couldn't keep him away with less than chains and a clog, or he's no true detective—and if he isn't a thoroughbred, then I want to know!"

Almost involuntarily this bit of compliment was wrung from the Sport, for with all his dislike, his repugnance, in fact, he could not help feeling that Richard Fyerband was a more than ordinarily smart man.

It did not take long for one so light of foot as was the Man of Crystals, to reach the scene of action, and pausing where his form had the advantage of a bit deeper shadow than elsewhere, Chris Cresson took visual notes "with both eyes wide open."

He saw at a glance that this had been no ordinary drunken squabble where sound so vastly exceeds fury, but that hot and deadly work had been on hand.

The fighting was all over, long before he could gain the spot, but both dead and living witnesses were there to give evidence.

In a little circle of light by himself, lay a dead man, his limbs contorted, his upturned face distorted, plainly proving how painful if swift his death had been.

But Chris Cresson only gave that shape a glance in passing, for his deepest interest lay with the living, just then!

Hardly had the Crystal Sport reached the scene of trouble, than a well-known voice rung forth, sharply, commandingly:

"Make way, here! Way, I tell you, fellows!"

The crowd had even so quickly grown to a considerable size, but the units of which it was composed, showed none of the hot, heedless obstinacy customary on such occasions, but fell back to either side as though mere waves divided by a vessel's prow.

Chris Cresson took an involuntary step forward, for he recognized both voice and figure on the instant, but then he recoiled as far, with those grim words of the Firebrand Detective ringing through his brain.

And, breathlessly watching her every movement while holding himself under cover, Chris Cresson beheld Empress Josephine part that crowd, to sink upon her knees by the side of yonder groaning, gasping, cursing wretch, heedless of her rich garments, paying no attention to her surroundings, with thoughts and cares only for the suffering mortal who apparently was fast floating out on the death-tide.

So it seemed to the large majority of those present, no doubt, and so it might have seemed to the Crystal Sport, perhaps, had Firebrand Dick been less free with his hints and insinuations.

"Watkins!" cried the Empress, as she lifted that shaggy head in her hands, then shifted it to an easier position upon her lap. "Who has done this foul deed? Speak, man! Name the foul assassin, and you shall be bitterly avenged—I swear it, on honor!"

Hardly words or sentiments calculated to soothe a dying man, but they sounded natural enough to nearly all who heard and saw; possibly Chris Cresson was the only man then present who felt a doubt.

"Is it another trap for me?" he involuntarily asked himself, and his right hand gripped a revolver-butt in readiness for action.

Barney Watkins opened his eyes at that address, and gave a subdued groan. It seemed to Cresson that the knave shrunk away from the woman who was so generously caring for him, but that may have been nothing more than an involuntary movement of pain, caused by his wound.

"Tell me, Watkins," the Empress repeated, her eyes seeming on fire, so vividly did they burn by the light of the two lanterns which had by this time appeared on the scene. "Who cut you? Who murdered your mate, lying yonder?"

"Cuss him—the Sheeny!" hoarsely panted the wounded man, lifting his head sufficiently from that supporting lap for a glance toward that corpse: the last of Jimmy Johnson, as Chris Cresson now realized, thanks to those flashing lanterns.

"What?" cried Empress Josephine, her voice rising higher, harsher, if such a term may be applied to an organ which was over musical.

"You surely can't mean—Not Rosenblatt?"

Watkins was groaning afresh, seemingly in mortal agony, but now he rallied with a touch of the fierceness which showed in the woman's tones, and with remarkably strong voice for a dying man, he vowed:

"The Sheeny—Morris Rosenblatt! We wasn't— He never gave us a show for our lives, but cut an 'shot—poor Jimmy!"

There came a brief pause, then Empress Josephine glanced from living to dead, giving a nod toward the last as she spoke:

"Look to him, some of you. Is he alive, or is he dead?"

That examination lasted but a few seconds, for death was written in every line of that face and form; but when the answer came, it was greeted by a deep, ominous murmur, which no man can ever forget after once hearing.

"By the Lord! she'll have a fire going, too hot and too wild for any— *I knew it!*"

Chris Cresson inwardly uttered that sentence, and the abrupt conclusion was brought about by the next move made by the Empire queen.

"Dead? And you, poor fellow—cut to death, maybe? You hear, men of Deadwood?" her voice lifting until it rung forth clear and thrilling as a trumpet call.

"Foul murder has been done, and I, for one, earnestly vow to know no rest until these poor men have been fully avenged!"

"Down with the Sheeny! Lynch him! Scatter and search! Catch and run him up a tree so mighty quick he'll never git through kicking!"

It takes so little to set a crowd of this description on fire, and the cry for human blood is far more readily raised than silenced. So it seemed on this occasion, for that single voice, lifted by a man on the opposite side of the crowd from where the Crystal Sport was standing, was quite sufficient, coming as it did immediately after the fierce outburst from the woman's lips, to set the entire crowd roaring for vengeance upon the dastardly killer!

But then, as though this was going further than she wished, Empress Jo lowered the wounded man's head from her lap to the ground, springing to her feet and crying, shrilly:

"Stop! Halt! Arrest the Jew if found, but no lynching! Two wrongs never yet made a right, and there are honest men enough in Deadwood to see full and ample justice done to the lawless!"

"Whooray for the Empress!"

"Go, now, and search for the villain," the woman said in more natural tones. "Go—arrest Morris Rosenblatt, and when found, fetch me word at once—without fail!"

More than half that assembly melted away in obedience to the impulse thus lent them, and Empress Jo cut very little time to waste in caring for both dead and injured.

Her slightest wish seemed equal to a command, that evening, and at her desire, a plank was soon procured, upon which the dead man was placed and carried away.

A couple of stout if coarse blankets were quickly turned into a fairly comfortable litter, and under the supervision of the Empress, Barney Watkins was lifted from the ground and placed upon it, then lifted by a couple of strong-armed fellows, who followed the lead of the woman as she turned away in the direction of the Empire.

Chris Cresson had watched through all this, with emotions which need not be detailed just now. He felt a very strong interest in the whole affair, yet he had grown cool-witted enough to realize that the less he thrust himself forward just then, the wiser.

Turning away in the direction of his hotel, he had taken but a few steps, when a hand in swinging at his side, brushed against a bit of paper pinned to the skirt of his snug-fitting tunic.

With a wondering ejaculation he secured this, and by the aid of a lighted match, he deciphered the penciled words:

"See you later, my lad. Don't chip, until I've shown you a lead."

No signature was appended, but Cresson knew Firebrand Dick had written those words. Only—how had he fastened them there, unseen?

CHAPTER XXI.

GOOD SAMARITANS.

SAUL DEMPSTER could not well doubt the evidence of his own eyes, and they plainly told him this wounded applicant for refuge was in disguise.

During that desperate struggle with his as yet unknown assailants, Morris Rosenblatt had received any amount of rough treatment, what with the force necessary to hold him helpless, to hustle him out of the Empire and away through the streets of Deadwood to a point where their nefarious schemes might be carried out to the end with less fear of interruption before that end was fully gained; and with that smothering, blinding muffler thrown over his head.

Cunningly though the disguise had been arranged, nothing in art was substantial enough to withstand such harsh treatment, and now, as the diamond-dealer lay senseless upon that humble couch, his deception was only too evident.

His iron-gray wig was awry, and the heavy beard showed signs of coming off that face without help of soap or razor; and when Agnes Dempster turned from closing and barring the door, she saw her father recoiling from the bedside, a look of mingled surprise and anger showing upon his gaunt visage.

At the same instant there came floating through the night those wild, fierce, blood-stirring yells of an awakening mob, telling the tale of crime and cruelty even more plainly than words could have done.

"The lynchers—after him!" hoarsely exclaimed Dempster, falling back another pace, and his face showing still stronger aversion as he glanced back at that helpless intruder.

Agnes likewise shrunk for a brief space, for

on one prior occasion it had been her ill-fortune to witness the terrible rush and frightful ending of a lynching-bee; but she as swiftly rallied, and her glorious blue eyes almost glowed as she spoke:

"He came to us in sore need, father; can we turn him out to—suffer like that other poor wretch?"

"But—if they're after him, and— Look!" his voice sinking to a husky whisper as he grasped his daughter with one hand, the other pointing to where a bloody left hand hung in full view. "Red—wet with the blood of— If he's a murderer, child?"

"It may be his own—look, poor man!" and Agnes pointed in turn to that patch of ominous color showing above the vest of the unconscious diamond-dealer. "He surely is badly injured, and we are— Help him first, father, then 'twill be time enough to think of law and justice."

While this hasty interchange was going on, that ominous roar without had died away, as the reader knows, through the swift interposition of Empress Josephine! And with their worst fears in a measure lulled by this favorable sign, father and daughter fell to work over the luckless mortal who had so oddly been cast upon their mercies.

Yet both were purely human, and as they were forced to shift the position of the injured man the better to look to his hurts, that disguise became more evident, and busy though her fingers were, Agnes Dempster could not help seeing how repugnant her father felt his duty was.

In addition to being a woman, Agnes was less suspicious by nature; and now, with as near an approach to reproof as her gentle tongue could ever attain when a dearly-loved one was in question, she murmured:

"He came to us, a stranger, in sorest need, dear. Then—who are we to turn him away unaided? What right have we to condemn him unheard?"

"I know all that, Aggie, pet, but—he may be the vilest criminal unhung!" said Dempster, with that strong aversion showing itself in both face and voice, although he still kept at his good work the while. "You heard that yelling, out town-ways?"

"Yes, but that is no positive proof of his guilt, father."

"Not when taken alone, but—" and he glanced toward that blood-stained hand, then over that disarranged disguise.

"It looks all against him, father, I admit, but does that hinder our lending him aid so sorely needed—like this?" gently asked Agnes.

"Of course not, but—I've you to think of, Aggie! And in helping this fellow, I may be risking your very life—who knows?"

"God, he knows, father," solemnly answered the maiden, then resuming her kindly ministrations like one who has not a fear for what the future may bring forth.

Saul Dempster was silenced if not convinced, and then he noticed a fact which could hardly have escaped his attention so long, had not his fears for the only relative death had left him been so strong: this disguised stranger was conscious, as well as alive.

So it was, Morris Rosenblatt had not entirely lost his consciousness, although he had been utterly unable to help himself or to lighten the burden these good Samaritans had assumed with his coming.

Like one in a dream he had heard the father and daughter speaking, and while so nearly lost to earth and its ordinary senses, the diamond-dealer realized—still as one hovering between dreams and awaking—that Agnes Dempster was pleading for his rescue, if not his very life.

When that brief, but unaffectedly pious sentence dropped from the maiden's lips, he was stung back to both life and motion, and making a feeble effort to raise himself from the bed, he huskily muttered:

"He knows I've done no wrong, lady, but—I'll go! I'll never—those demons may—I'll go—now!"

"Father?" came from her paling lips, and her blue eyes said all the rest: enough to change the sentiments of that father, and with a strong but kindly hand he restrained the wounded man, pressing him gently back while hastily saying:

"You can't do it, man, even if we'd let ye! You're hurt—badly hurt, don't you know it?"

The diamond-dealer was very easily handled now, although few men could have made a more desperate fight against odds and crippling disadvantages than he had only a few minutes before.

His brain turned dizzy again with that sudden effort to arise, and again that deathly sickness came over his person as he sunk limply back upon that friendly couch.

Their sympathy quickening with each minute that passed along, both father and daughter hastened to restore their stranger guest, and succeeded so well that ere long Morris Rosenblatt was able to whisper with greater distinctness, and much less incoherency.

He assured them that he had been guilty of no crime; that he had only fought for his life

against merciless knaves who surely intended him evil of the worst description.

All trace of his former painfully-labored accent was gone, now, and knowing that his cunning disguise had betrayed him to these people, the wounded man seemed particularly desirous of clearing his record in their estimation. Or—was it because Agnes gazed so compassionately upon him?

Be that as it may, Morris Rosenblatt would not be quieted, although these kindly Samaritans urged him to forget all else save the necessity of rest and quietness; he would not be under the imputation of being an impostor longer than it took to explain away those damning circumstances.

"It is gospel truth, good people, however much you may feel inclined to doubt," he said, with feverish brilliancy in the eyes from which those disguising glasses had been lost during his furious fight for liberty, if not for life itself. "I have done no wrong, I am sinned against, rather than sinning."

"It is so, then, and being so, why not let us take it all for granted, sir?" cut in Saul Dempster, his bony hand still resting above that hurriedly-panting bosom, ready to increase in weight should another rash attempt to arise be made.

"Because you doubt—I heard you say—"

"That was then, this is now, sir," quietly interposed Agnes, a soft, maidenly blush rising to her cheeks as those dark eyes turned her way with an even greater brilliancy.

"I know. I heard, when—I was unable to move, to speak, yet I heard the kindly, womanly words which you spoke, lady! And if I ever forget them, may Heaven—"

A small hand was placed over his lips, then withdrawn, yet not so swiftly the palm failed to feel a kiss—warm, almost feverishly hot.

That blush grew deeper, and the maiden recoiled, instinctively hiding that hand beneath the apron she wore. She glanced toward her father, but if Saul Dempster saw aught more than what showed upon the surface, he gave no sign, but held himself in reserve for a more fitting moment.

All he did was to press a bit heavier with his hand, and gravely utter the warning words:

"You're doing no good to yourself, stranger, by trying so hard to talk. Better be quiet, and let us finish tending to that hurt; it's not so mighty bad for looks, but I've known less to—"

"Father, dear!"

"There's nothing killing in the sober truth, Aggie, and he'll feel none the worse for knowing that he's hard hit. Not but what I reckon he'll pull through safely enough, but he's got to help, in place of hindering. You understand that much, stranger?"

"Yes, but—I heard what—let me explain, and then I'll submit to whatever you may think best," almost pleadingly spoke the other.

Saul Dempster shook his grizzled head frowningly, but Agnes, with the swifter, truer intuition of her sex, whispered:

"Better so, father. 'Twill trouble him less, and be sooner over. Let him explain, and then we'll do the rest."

Softly though her tones were pitched, Morris Rosenblatt both heard and understood. Once more that glow of gratitude warmed his eyes and face, and he earnestly uttered:

"I thank you for that, lady; how gratefully, may I be able to make you comprehend, long before our final parting comes 'round!"

"We'll take it all for granted, stranger, but if you insist on telling how came ye so, better get at it. The less talking done the quicker you'll get to resting easy, is my opinion about it!"

Grave, yet kindly, and still the wounded man felt a chill as he was brought back to plain prose. But then, with eyes fixed upon daughter rather than father, he resumed his explanation.

He declared that he was a detective, on the trail of dangerous criminals, hence felt fully justified in wearing a disguise, even as he played a part strongly foreign to his nature.

"I thought no one could penetrate my secret, but it seems they must have done so, since I gave not the slightest excuse for being treated so brutally," his explanation ran; and then, without distinctly stating just where he was first assailed, or who he blamed for that outrage, he told how he had fought for life and liberty as any honest man might.

"I had to strike hard, for— Well—with a faint touch upon his bullet-pierced body, "you can see! They shot—to kill! And I thought their evil work was done, too!"

Then he told how, faint and dizzy, almost like one dying in a dream, he staggered onward through the night. He told how, a stranger in a strange town, with never a friend to vouch for him, he had dimly recalled an angel face seen several times since—

"That'll do, stranger," and Dempster checked further speech by laying a palm over his lips. "You're a stranger now, and a stranger you'll have to remain until— What?"

Just then there came a sharp rap at the cabin door.

CHAPTER XXII.

TURNING MORE TRICKS THAN ONE.

Up to that instant, the Firebrand Detective, as "Party Pizen," had given no signs of wearing the velvet foot; but his vanishment from that chamber was effected precisely as the Crystal Sport finally concluded.

For reasons which hardly require further elaboration just at present, the detective was desirous of breaking short that almost enforced interview, yet hardly wished to do so by a show of actual force.

For one thing, he began to see that this oddly-garbed fellow might well be of greater value as an ally than as an adversary. And, too, bold and reckless though Firebrand Dick could show himself when the occasion demanded, he knew that any attempt on his part to break away against the will of Chris Cresson might easily prove disastrous to one or to both.

And so, when that convenient alarm broke forth without, calling the Crystal Sport to his window, the detective instantly resolved to make the most of his opportunity.

He hardly dared hope to get clear away from the chamber without detection, but he made the effort—and succeeded!

Turning the key and knob at the same time, he swiftly yet silently drew the door open, slipping through and pulling the barrier to at his heels, all the time keeping the catch drawn fully back. Then, when the door was entirely closed, he let the handle gradually turn again, and the catch was in place without the faintest sound to warn the eagerly-listening Sport of that adroit escape.

"Stud-hoss luck!" grimly muttered the detective, as he sped away on tiptoes, making hardly sufficient noise to meet his own keen ears. "May look just a bit cowardly, but enough sight better than to have to bluff or fight one's way through! Now—good-by, Christopher!"

Richard Firebrand had spoken sooth when he declared he was putting up at the Midland Hotel, and all he had to do after escaping from that one chamber was to steal a few yards along the gloomy corridor, then enter another room on the opposite side.

This was accomplished successfully just as that chuckling farewell was whispered—not for Crystal Caris to catch, but merely as a safety-valve for the detective's triumph.

Cresson had hit the mark in the center when he spoke to the detective about his not intrusting all his eggs to one basket, as was plainly proven now. Although the road-agents had stripped him of all property, and nearly one-half his clothes, Firebrand Dick found all he required in that chamber, and without running the risk of striking match or lighting candle, which fact might draw dangerous attention his way, since he could hear the astonished Sport just then flinging wide his door, he fell to work in the dark.

That was relieved to a certain degree by the moon and star light which found a way in through his one window; but even without that dim assistance, Firebrand Dick could have wrought the swift transformation which now occupied his fingers and thoughts.

With marvelous rapidity he cast off the disguise worn as Party Pizen, and opening a capacious valise at the foot of his bed, he produced a change of clothes, together with facial adornments to correspond.

Had there been both light and an audience, eyes or brains could hardly have realized each change, so swiftly and certainly were they brought about; accomplished there in gloom, with the stern necessity of maintaining perfect silence, the feat certainly reached the marvelous.

Dirt and stain vanished like magic beneath the swift application of a medicated cloth, and then the detective stood forth a full-fledged "sport," a model for gamblers to pattern after!

All this while Firebrand Dick was straining his ears to keep himself posted as to the movements of the Crystal Sport. He chuckled a bit as he heard that call, so guarded at first, then rising in volume with each brief repetition, and growing fiercer in proportion.

"You don't really expect an answer, pardner, and that lets me out!" he mentally answered, but without lip or facial muscle moving; for even so soon his skilled hands were at work fastening in place an "adorable" pair of mustaches and imperial!

With a silent chuckle, too, he heard Chris Cresson close and lock his chamber door, then hurry off down-stairs.

"Bound for the circus, or I've read his nature wrong," mentally commented the detective, swiftly completing the lightning change, drawing key from lock and slipping it into a pocket while crossing back to the window. "I'd rather he wouldn't, if only because I want to take a squint that way myself!"

He deftly raised the sash, then glanced forth. The ground beneath appeared clear, despite the gloom, for that stunted tree yonder cast a shadow to the base of the building directly beneath his window.

"You're getting rather old for boyish escapades, Dicky, lad, but better chance *this* than

risk having the Sport jump on your back as you go out the front way like a gentleman!"

Only a man accustomed to working under cover, and to winning the great majority of his professional points through cunning rather than direct fighting—although Firebrand Dick's past record could show up many a hard, desperate fight against long odds, when nothing else could save or carry his game—would have given thought to such a thing as Chris Cresson's lying in wait at the front exit; but that possibility was strong enough to lead the detective along his odd course.

Fastening the window in place, Firebrand Dick slipped his feet and body through the opening, hanging for an instant at the length of his arms, then loosing his hold and dropping safely to the ground.

Thought itself was not quicker than his wheeling and his leaping to one side, hand on revolver as his keen eyes swept around that semicircle of visible space; but nothing showed up to justify that caution, and with a long breath of relief the detective stole swiftly around the hotel by the rear way, then moved off in the direction from whence that alarm had proceeded.

Rapidly as he had moved, Firebrand Dick was too late to catch a sight of the Crystal Sport as that worthy hastened toward that same point of the compass; but he was not long in spying Cresson out once he had gained the scene of death and bloodshed.

That was just in time to hear the Empress speak first to the wounded rough, and as the lantern-light flashed across their faces, the detective had no difficulty in recognizing Barney Watkins in that injured person. And with that recognition came pretty much the same thought which struck the Crystal Sport; might not the scoundrel attempt to cover his own sins, and at the same time try to play even with the adventurer who had so dangerously interfered with the success of the plans that evil gang had been shaping?

Then it was that the Firebrand Detective scribbled that hasty warning, and fastening it to a stout pin, one end of which he bent into a hook, he watched his opportunity for delivering that warning without running the risk of another squabble with the suspicious Sport.

That came when the first uneasy swaying caught the crowd at mention of the slayer by Barney Watkins; and the detective instantly improved the opening thus offered him.

Feeling secure against detection in his new disguise of "flash" sporting man, or "tin-horn gambler," Firebrand Dick brushed past Crystal Chris from the rear, at the same time deftly fastening the bent pin in the skirt of that corduroy tunic.

If Cresson saw at all, he certainly never suspected what was in the wind; and by shifting his station just then and thus, Firebrand Dick made yet another discovery which he fancied might result in his own benefit as a professional man.

Although Empress Jo so quickly quelled that first dangerous outbreak, the man on whose partially shaded face Firebrand Dick was then gazing surely must have had experience in wild life sufficient to convince him this fight of law against disorder had only begun; yet that man turned and stole silently away from the center of excitement without waiting to witness the struggle which must almost surely come.

The dark eyes of the detective caught a reddish glitter as he saw this, and in his throat rose the murmur:

"When a man of his caliber pulls out of a game like this promises to be, there's heap sight more afloat than the stakes shown aboveboard, and I just know it! So—here's for a flyer, anyhow!"

Trained brains work with wonderful swiftness, and their owners know how to decide where one less thoroughly broken to harness would hesitate and lose the golden opportunity.

And that pale-faced man had hardly turned his back upon the dead and living, silently stealing away, than Firebrand Dick had formed his resolve, and was moving off in the same direction.

As a matter of course he was too shrewd to think of following in the direct course of his game, particularly while so near that crowd; for he knew the chances were great in favor of the fellow fearing some such move, and taking precautions to guard against it, if so.

Firebrand Dick chuckled to himself as he saw those frequent backward glances so long as the crowd was in sight; but as he, himself, was on the opposite side of the street, where he could keep fairly well in the shadows, those keen eyes had precious little chance of discovering him or his espial.

As those ominous sounds broke forth with redoubled fury, the man in advance quickened his pace almost to a run, and having seen nothing to cause him alarm through those rearward glances, he now showed little fear of trouble from that quarter, moving still more briskly, until he came within fair sight of a lighted window in a small building on the extreme edge of town.

Firebrand Dick likewise noticed this dim

light, but it told him nothing, until he saw his game slacken pace materially, and turn from the beaten trail in that direction, using more caution than he had shown since fairly winning clear of yonder gathering.

With his curiosity increasing, the detective crouched lower and kept closer to cover from that moment on, but never losing sight of his game, and mentally registering every movement for possible use in the time to come.

He saw the fellow steal silently up to the window, which was curtained by a white cloth, but one edge of the glass was left uncovered, and through that space he stared for some little time.

"What is it, you villain?" murmured the interested detective to himself, as he watched this espial. "Don't do, as well as act, or I may have to—Steady, you p'izen sarpint!"

For the fellow was shaking a clinched fist at something visible to his prying-eyes, and knowing the man as he did, Firebrand Dick would hardly have been surprised at seeing him draw gun for a treacherous shot at whatever object his anger had been aroused and directed.

Instead of this, however, the fellow seemed content with that mute expression of his sentiments, for a few seconds later he turned from the window and glided silently away, now heading toward town.

Firebrand Dick lay low in hiding until his game had passed him by without suspecting how closely all his movements had been watched; but then, lifting his head to gaze after the villain, the detective muttered:

"Go your way, old fellow! I'll know how to find you when wanted, and just now—what sort of side-show's in there, I wonder!"

He crept up to the window, and caught sight of Morris Rosenblatt lying on the bed, talking with feverish interest to father and daughter.

Drawing back a bit, the detective scribbled a few words on a leaf torn from his note-book, then moving silently to the door, he stuck the warning fast by means of a pin, then clinched his hand and gave a vigorous rap, the next instant darting around the corner of the cabin and taking to hasty flight.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE EMPRESS AROUSED.

JOSEPHINE ST. JOHN found plenty of willing hands to do her bidding among the citizens who had gathered in answer to that wild alarm; and she showed no disinclination to exercise the authority a beautiful, dashing woman of her class seems to hold as a birthright.

It was her will that the remains of Jimmy Johnson should be removed to a vacant house which had come into possession of the Empire proprietors through the natural line of business, and there guarded until its final disposition was decided upon.

That might be through the regular channel of the law—for that district had been duly organized, and had its legal officials, even if Judge Lynch and his grim aides were wont to claim the larger share of punishing real and suspected criminals—or it might end in a quaint "planting," where grief and hilarity blended grotesquely together.

But the Empress apparently held a far stronger interest in the living than in the dead, since she herself took the lead in conducting groaning, cursing Barney Watkins from the spot where he had come by his richly-merited punishment, to the Empire.

None of the citizens who heard the orders given the bearers thought anything strange that such should be the woman's decision, for nearly all knew that the wounded tough had acted as one of the "bouncers," or fighting-men regularly attached to the gambling hell; and while he had, no doubt, come to grief while outside the regular line of that business, Empress Jo was hardly one to go back on even so humble a friend as this.

Closely followed by the bearers of that blanket litter, then, the St. John led the way direct to the Empire, and opening a door at one side of the building, stepped aside until the men with their groaning burden had passed inside.

All was dark beyond that entrance, but the bearers had been well selected, and showed no doubt or hesitation as to what was expected of them. But, turning toward the curious group of followers, Empress Jo said in clear, crisp tones:

"Thanks, awfully, my good friends, but you can serve us better outside than in. You heard what poor Watkins said; that he was cut without any just cause or provocation, by a Dutch Jew, Morris Rosenblatt."

"We know the Sheeny, Empress!"

"Then, knowing him, do your level best to find and arrest him! Don't kill or cripple unless it's either that or his escape. Take him, for fair trial and wise judgment, but—take him, all the same!"

With these words in conclusion, Empress Jo stepped back and closed the door, putting it in shape to resist admittance for any save those in the secret of its fastenings.

This done, the almost utter darkness in which she found herself proved no hindrance to her

swift, almost noiseless movements. And in a few seconds more, a bright light showed at the end of that narrow passage, along which the men quickly carried their wounded comrade.

This passage terminated at the door of an upstairs chamber, and Empress Josephine nodded toward a cot-bed, upon which the groaning wretch was presently deposited.

"You can go, now, lads," she said, immediately this was done. "You know the way down through the hall; take that route, please."

"Can't we help with him, first, Empress?"

"No. I can manage. If not—well, I'll send in a call to Morgan, by the tube. Good-night, lads. And you might skirmish round a bit, to have a finger in the pie if the Sheeny is caught—see?"

"Do you really want him kicking, or is it—good-by?"

"Kicking, if you can be sure of holding your grip until I can take charge. If not—over the range!" coldly answered the woman, betraying no more emotion than would have been the case had she alluded to a chicken for her dinner.

In possession of her will on this point, then, the litter-bearers left the chamber, and the Empress turned toward the wounded thug, giving an impatient ejaculation as he groaned again.

"Simmer down, Barney, can't you? Just to listen, one would think you an old woman, or else in a terrible bad way of your own!"

"That devil! He hit hard—I'm cut all to little bits! I'm all shoestrings! I've got my last sickness, and— Oh, curse him from top to toe! Curse him from this to all eternity! Curse—"

"Shut trap, you howler!" angrily cut in the Empress, one of her fair hands dropping over those lips with a degree of emphasis which said precious little for her sympathy, or else broadly hinted that she held this groaning wretch as far worse scared than hurt.

Turning the light so that its best rays were at her service, Empress Josephine fell to work over the wounded man in a truly business-like manner, laying open his garments with the assistance of the gold-hilted dirk plucked forth from her hair, and then washing away the clot of blood until she could give that ugly cut a thorough examination.

Blindly though he had struck, Morris Rosenblatt had sent the steel home with savage force, and had not fortune stood friend to the thug, his death would have come almost as swiftly as it had come to Jimmy Johnson.

As it was, the borrowed blade had buried its length in his flesh, narrowly missing the abdominal cavity, yet slipping between two ribs, and making a wound which might even yet end in death, unless care and wise nursing came his way.

Empress Josephine saw this much as soon as she had cleansed the mouth of the wound, but it was her rôle just then to make light of the hurt, and so her first words were almost of scoffing at those unmanly groans and babyish flinchings.

"And you never tired of vaunting your grit and your nerve! Don't you put on that suit again without first stealing a look around to make sure I'm not within laughing range, Barney!"

"Then it isn't—I'll not croak, Empress?"

"You'll never escape the gallows if you depend on this cut carrying you across the great divide, pardner," came the instant quip.

"But—it bites like a snake!"

"A hurt that means business never tells what it's at, remember, Barney. Why, man, you're hardly able to get up and dance a jig, I'll own, but so far from croaking, I'd insure your taking your regulars inside of two weeks, for half the cost of one of your big drunks!"

Hardly the manner of speech one would expect from such lovely lips, but Empress Jo knew her man, and could always adapt her language to her immediate surroundings.

Her first business was to lessen those craven fears, and then come to a more perfect understanding as to just how that trouble had come to a head; something she knew had not been told, as yet.

Barney Watkins was a born liar, and none knew better than Empress Jo how surely he had been falsifying out yonder, when surrounded by that eager, curiously-listening crowd.

She rather preferred lying then, but now—that was different!

All the while talking to "brace up" her patient, the St. John neatly and expeditiously finished caring for that hurt, and really did the work up as scientifically as any medical man apt to answer a call at that hour would or could have done.

"There you are, pardner, a wiser if not a handsomer man," she declared, as her deft fingers covered over that bandaged hurt; then drawing back a little to let the light fall more squarely upon that face, she spoke the words which had so long been held in check.

"Now then, Watkins, out with it in a lump! How did you fellows come to make such a miserable fiasco of it all?"

The wounded desperado shivered a bit as he

caught that gleaming light from her dark eyes, but he knew the woman by reputation, and dared not attempt to deceive her, even on the chance of lessening the blame which might be attached to himself.

He told a fairly accurate story; told how they had hustled the diamond-dealer out of the saloon by the secret door, through the dark passage to the side entrance, then into the street.

"We hustled him away, until it looked safe to leave him with the couple o' us, ye see, ma'am! for then we could play it was a case of too big a jag, and so—"

"How did he get away from you? Boil it down, I tell you, man!"

"We hustled him over to where you found us, then, and reckoned we'd save both time and trouble by putting the hobbles on. And then—he cut me, and sent me spinning!"

"And you two fellows let him get away with you both? When you had him foul? When every advantage was with you, too? Oh!" with a savage gesture which fitly matched the vicious restraint she put upon her mad passions.

Barney Watkins shivered with fear, and shrunk to the wall at the rear of his cot. But then he managed to utter:

"I shot him—I was falling, sick as a dog, but I plugged him right where he lived!"

"Then where is he now? Why wasn't he found there with the rest of the carrion? Oh, one woman is worth a million such miserable puppets as you trash! If I'd only trusted to myself, when—"

Empress Josephine broke off abruptly, turning away to stand facing the blank wall at the other end of that room.

She was plainly fighting against herself, and it was with mingled fear and superstitious awe that Barney Watkins watched her.

That it did not take longer for the woman to win that battle, was yet another proof of her great nerve and strong will power. And when it was fairly won, even the signs of struggle were banished, and it was with all of her customary composure that Empress Josephine returned to the cot on which her wounded henchman was lying.

In a very different tone she asked him question after question concerning that ugly affair, and never gave over until she knew all Barney Watkins could tell her. And he stuck to the unvarnished truth, too, so far as possible, wisely deeming that less risky than any lying gloss.

"'Twas a crooked streak o' luck, but I done my level best," he concluded, with another husky groan of mingled pain and chagrin.

"Ay! How crooked you haven't even made a guess, man!" exclaimed the Empress in fierce, yet suppressed tones. "A streak of crooked luck that will end in the gallows, or at the Pen, unless our cards are played to better advantage than this last deal!"

Something in her manner, even more than the words she uttered, gave her henchman the clue he had failed to grasp as yet, and giving a start in bed, he hoarsely ejaculated:

"What! You don't— You surely don't mean—"

"I mean that warning word came here all too late!"

"And that— Surely, no!"

"Surely, yes!" with a vicious emphasis in her tones. "The cursed bloodhound was on our track before that message reached us, and now— Oh, why was I a woman? Why wasn't it so I could act as well as plan?"

Springing to her feet, Empress Jo strode up and down the length of the room, her hands tightly clinched and shaking, now making a blow, now shooting out in curved fingers as though clutching at the throat of a hated enemy; but through all showing how terribly aroused were her worst passions.

"If you'd only give a hint so we could 'a' known what—" the wounded man ventured, finally.

"To what end, you miserable cur?" flashed the woman, whirling to face the tremulous speaker, her eyes all aglow, her face far from beautiful.

CHAPTER XXIV.

TWO OF A KIND.

EMPERESS JOSEPHINE ONCE checked her fierce temper as she saw how that helpless wretch was shrinking from her in abject terror.

"I'm a brute to fling out at you so hotly, Watkins," she forced herself to say, in more natural tones, as she resumed the seat she had abandoned when that vicious spasm overthrew her forced composure.

"I done my level best, ma'am," meekly assured the wounded thug.

"And you might have done better had I only trusted you more thoroughly, is it?" with a faint smile as she read the words he dared not openly pronounce. "But, unluckily for us all, Barney, I didn't make the full discovery in time to give you the office."

"Then—it's dead certain, ma'am?"

"To my way of thinking, yes," with fierce emphasis. "Word came all too late, and the devil was on our track before we tried to cross-scent him off!"

"But—the other one?"

Barney Watkins put this query with evident fear and trembling, but before an answer could be given, even granting one was ready for such a humble member of the "family," there came a peculiar sound trembling through the air, and springing to her feet, Empress Jo crossed to a tiny break in the wall, and apparently gave a puff—surely it was not word or whisper?

"The old man's coming, Barney," said the woman, turning away from the wall, and casting a glance toward the cot with its helpless occupant as she crossed the room toward the door. "If he tries to pinch you too hard, you're hurt so badly you can't talk much."

"You'll not let him—"

"Of course not. Here he comes, and seems to be in a hurry, too!"

The sounds of swift, almost silent footsteps reached her listening ear, and Empress Josephine turned the knob and opened the door. Just as she did so, Frenchy Frank Mitchell was revealed, and before the woman could speak, he abruptly demanded:

"How is he? You've got him in here, of course?"

"Of course he's in here. Where else should I take him?"

"Then he's not croaked? He can— Hallo, Barney! How the foul fiend did you contrive to make such an infernal botch as this?"

"I didn't—never had a show to—" huskily moaned the wounded thug, and true to her promise, Empress Jo interposed on his behalf.

"Don't shake him up too roughly, Frank, or we'll have another grave to dig! He's cut mighty badly, and then I've been putting him through his paces, you know."

"Let you alone for that!"

"Of course, being a woman," with a short, mocking laugh. "And you, my stern censor? Of course you've not been idle all this while, even if I did have to play a lone hand with the lads, dead and crippled!"

"I was looking after business, you can be sure."

"Well, that's a bit more comfortable. I didn't know but what you'd been— On business, eh? Where, and just what, Frank?"

A fleeting flash passed over his naturally pale face, and as she caught this telltale sign, Empress Jo gave a low, irritating laugh.

But she had won her first point, since Frenchy Frank no longer pelted the wounded desperado with dangerous queries.

"You'll be all right after a bit of quiet, Barney," said the Empress, in an off-hand tone, then tapping Mitchell on an arm as she turned away, with the request:

"Come with me for a bit, Frank. I've got something to say to you, and unless that hang-dog face of yours tells lies, you've got a dose bottled up for poor me!"

"Why wouldn't I have, then?" sullenly muttered the gambler, but following her lead through a side door, which conducted them into another better-furnished chamber.

The woman closed the door behind them, and thus insuring perfect privacy, she cast aside the half-mocking smile she had worn since the arrival of her confederate, and sinking into an easy-chair, bowed head upon hands, like one on the verge of yielding to despair or grief.

If Empress Josephine thought to disarm the gambler by acting thus, her care and arts were thrown away, for without ceremony Mitchell blurted forth:

"Well, what have you got to say about it, anyway?"

"About what, pray?" coldly asked the woman, lifting her head and meeting his scowling stare with a look of angry defiance.

"You know well enough. What made you take such long chances just to pinch that Sheeny? Couldn't you wait to pluck him after the ordinary fashion?"

"You reckon he was worth the plucking, don't you?"

"That may all be, but why in such a mighty hurry? Wasn't one row fat enough for the fire? Couldn't you wait until another night, unless you found a better chance outside the Empire?"

Empress Josephine was gazing keenly, curiously into that handsome face, like one trying to read an enigma.

"I wonder if you are really the blind innocent your tongue is trying to make me believe, Frank?"

"And I'm beginning to wonder what cause you have for dreading to give a direct answer to a plain question?" bluntly retorted the gambler. "Have you been back-capping the deal, girl? Have you—"

"Neither one nor the other, and right well you know as much, Frenchy Frank," coolly interposed the Empress, even smiling into his frown-darkened face for a brief space.

But that did not last long. She was far too anxious as to the probable result of that recent fiasco to extend that adroit sparring longer, and something in her altered countenance led the gambler to hark back to his former point.

"Why not out with it, Jo? Why did you take such long chances with this Sheeny diamond-peddler?"

"Wait a bit, pardner. Let's go at it slow and

easy, if you can come off your high horse for a moment or two. And now—pray just what is it you're blaming me with?"

"You know already, but since you prefer to have it that way, all right," with a touch of returning irritation entering his tones. "You caught that Jew on a string this evening, didn't you?"

"Well, what of that, Frank?"

"Just this much: You gave me the sign, and that is one we've sworn to obey without stopping to question, no matter what may be the seeming peril, or what our surroundings. Isn't that so?"

"Straight as a string, Frenchy," admitted the Empress, easily.

"Of course it is! And when you gave that signal, at the same time pointing out the fellow who was buzzing you, what else could I do?"

"What else did you do, pardner?" with a provoking drawl, plainly showing that the woman was maliciously prolonging that suspense.

"Passed the signal on to those in waiting, of course. Why ask me what you know fully as well as I do?"

"Possibly because I'm like you, Frenchy: fond of asking foolish questions! Why, man! can't you begin to see through the hole in the millstone, even yet?"

The gambler passed a white hand over his face, smoothing his heavy goatee to a point before replying, although the woman fancied she could detect a half-fierce, half-mocking glimmer in his black eyes.

Could it be possible that he too was purposely sparring with words even while affecting the strongest anxiety to get at the bottom facts of the case?

If so, knowing him as she did, Empress Josephine felt morally certain the gambler had been up to something he was either afraid or ashamed to confide to her ears.

"I know what has happened, and that's about all," came his assertion a moment later; and if he wasn't very much in earnest, then his face and manner flatly lied. "You know something more than that, Jo? You had a better reason than a mere hope of boodle, to make you run such long chances to down the Jew?"

"No more a Jew than you are a Sheeny yourself, Frank! If he had been nothing more than showed on the surface, do you reckon I'd have called such means into play?"

"That's just what's been biting me ever since I caught that secret signal, girl," with a return of his anxious scowl. "But if he isn't what he pretends to be, how did you find it out? And when?"

"I never for an instant doubted his being just what he laid claim to, up to his bowing before me this evening," seriously declared the Empress, rapidly adding: "But as he stooped closer to look at my diamonds, I saw that he wore a false beard, and that—"

"Is hardly excuse for risking so much, Jo!"

"Not when taken alone, perhaps. I know there are others wearing disguises just as cunning inside the limits of Deadwood," with a short, not exactly pleasant laugh. "But when I felt—well, I gave you that secret order, pardner, and if you had failed to obey it—"

"I was bound to obey, and I *did* obey. But why—"

"Why did I give it, you ask?" slowly, then adding with quickened but lowered tones: "Because the pretended German Jew was none other than a detective in disguise, Frank Mitchell!"

The gambler gave an involuntary start at this, and his face seemed to turn a shade paler, though that may have been the result of his shifting position, which brought the light at a different angle across his handsome features.

"A detective? Do you really mean that, old girl?"

Somehow his manner was hardly emphatic enough to thoroughly fit either words or subject, and once more that odd suspicion returned to the Empress. Leaning a bit closer to the gambler, she said sharply:

"What's the matter with you, Frank? You're not at all like yourself, and I'd lay odds you've either had or are expecting fresh trouble!"

"What makes you reckon like that, Jo?"

"You do. What's gone wrong your way, Frenchy?"

"I haven't said anything has gone wrong, but something has happened, if that's enough for you."

"What was it, then?"

"Tell you later on. Just now—this fizzle of yours. What makes you think the Sheeny is a detective, Jo?"

The answer was not very prompt in coming. Her brows wrinkled, and her red lips were turned redder by the pinching they received from nervous thumb and finger.

It was as though the woman hardly knew just how to put her meaning into plain speech, but as the gambler gave another impatient gesture, Empress Jo spoke out:

"Well, call it instinct, for lack of a better explanation, Frank. I saw that the fellow was wearing a false beard, and at the same time I caught a flash of devil-fire from under those tinted glasses of his. Call it *instinct*, then, but I'd wager my very life on the fact: he is a de-

tective, and he has come here to Deadwood expressly on our account, too, or I'll never make a guess again!"

"After us?" echoed the gambler, with a start which was purely genuine, no matter what the other had been. "What for, girl?"

"Because of the diamonds, Frenchy, and you know that without my telling you!" sharply retorted the woman, with a vicious gesture. "The diamonds, and he'll have them—or he'll fill a bloody grave!"

CHAPTER XXV.

LAYING ASIDE THEIR MASKS.

WITH that utterance came a final dropping of the mask she had assumed for the occasion, and Josephine St. John stood revealed in her true colors.

No one who beheld her then would ever think of calling her beautiful, much less lovely. While her regularity of features might remain the same, in those eyes glittered an unholy fire, and about that red-lipped mouth showed an expression that was almost tigerish.

Nothing of all this seemed new or startling to Frenchy Frank Mitchell, and as her anger increased, his appeared to calm down.

Yet his countenance showed that he held this fierce charge was well worth closer attention, until its truth or falsity was finally determined.

"He'll never lay grip on the first, but he may find what he's given Jimmy Johnson," coldly declared the gamester. "But, after all that has happened of late, I'm not taking so many things for granted, old lady."

"Which means you don't believe my words?"

"Which means that if this idea should turn out a mistake, 'twould not be the only one we've put on record, Jo."

"Through who, fault, then?"

Fiercely came that question, but in place of flinching, Frenchy Frank merely smiled, showing the edges of his white teeth below his jetty mustaches.

"Surely not through fault of mine!" added the Empress, hotly, now giving free vent to her fierce passions, as though by way of making amends for the stern restraint of the past. Had I been only able to take part in the outside game, nothing of all this would have happened!"

Frenchy Frank gave a low, prolonged whistle as he gazed at the beautiful fury, then softly murmured, as though to himself:

"And she really looks as though she believed all that, too!"

It was a risky venture to make with a woman of her nature, particularly when the Empress was so thoroughly aroused as she surely was now; but the gambler had known her for a long time, and quickly saw that he had made no miscalculation.

A brief pause, during which Empress Jo fought the fight and won the victory; then, in greatly subdued tones and manner she spoke again:

"I really *do* believe it all, Frank, but maybe I'm in the wrong. If so, of course, you can set me right?"

Very quietly came the words, but back of them lay the storm, as none could know better than the man who so smilingly met that gaze. Yet he felt that he held the power now, and was determined to make the most of it while the calm lasted.

"I'm less sweeping in my remarks than you seemed inclined to be, Sweetheart. I can't deny that there have been blunders made and wise moves neglected, but I'm not charging *all* these against others; I'm even willing to admit that I may have made one or two my own wise self!"

"Why wouldn't you, then?" with a rising sneer. "The record will show—"

"What will the record show, Angel?" interrupted the gambler, with a gesture which demanded rather than requested attention. "Suppose we run over a few items on that same record, then? Will you?"

"And while we waste time in idle chatter, that devil in Sheeny shape is making the best of his opportunity!"

"You didn't stop to think of that when you were playing with my curiosity a bit ago, did you, Precious?" sneered the gamester; but then adding without waiting for an answer: "That's all right, Jo. I'll go his bail that Morris Rosenblatt won't run clean out of our reach in the few minutes it'll take to run over our cue-card to date."

Empress Jo gave a start at this confident speech, so unlike the usually cautious, "hedging" sporting man with whom her fortunes were so closely allied.

"You know more about that devil than you've been willing to tell, Frank! You've seen him since—when, and when?"

"You've been filling the space so full I hadn't a chance to do any telling on my side, Jo," retorted Mitchell, with a brief chuckle. "If I can coax you to button up for a minute or two, now—"

"Go on, you villain!" cried the woman, leaning back in her chair and accompanying her words with a smile that seemed to herald the re-

turn of good humor. "Talk a straight string, and I'll do the listening up to the queen's own taste!"

"All right," with a curt nod, squaring himself in his seat and marking off each point as made with forefinger tapping open palm. "Just turn your mind and memory back a few hours; to the coming of that message of warning which—"

"Which came too late for the caution it conveyed!" broke in the Empress, with a fierce gesture. "Even then that devil in human guise was right here in Deadwood, plotting how best to down us for all time!"

"By which you mean this real or counterfeit Sheeny?"

"Of course. Who else *should* I mean?"

"I haven't come to him yet, on the record, Jo, so just try buttoning up again, will you?"

"Go on, since you're determined to play the game out that way."

"It ought to be a straight, square deal when only you and I are the players, old girl," with a touch of sincerer feeling in his tones. "But as I set out to say, that warning from our pal, back near the big lakes, told us to 'ware hawk, and gave us an idea about when and in what shape to look for the enemy."

"One too late, the other a mistaken guess!"

"And acting on this warning, we did our level best to clip the wings of that same hawk, before he could work any further mischief."

"And how did it all pan out? A fizzle! A mere flash in the pan which left us far worse off than if we hadn't taken a single step! You know that, Frenchy, if you know anything at all!"

"If we *did* fail, through whose fault was it?"

"Does that mean 'twas through fault of mine, sir?"

"Wait a bit, Jo," with the shadow of a smile flitting across his pale face as he shifted his position slightly, the better to slip a hand into a breast pocket, holding it there while he continued: "You know the sort of work we did out yonder. You know that we guarded every trail by which any save one thoroughly acquainted with the Black Hills could possibly enter Deadwood."

"Yes, and what did it amount to in the end?"

"We caught a duck who answered to the hint sent us, anyway," without show of irritation such as these frequent interruptions might well have excused under the circumstances. "And when we found that monogram on his guns—You've heard tell of Firebrand Dick, my girl?"

"If I've heard, I certainly haven't seen him in these parts," came the malicious retort. "Having, why didn't you hold, Frenchy? And then, is Firebrand Dick the only man living whose names begin with those letters? But your geese were ever swans, old fellow!"

With a cold, half-sneering smile the gambler heard her to the end, then withdrew his hand from his bosom, reaching it toward her, then opening his hand and revealing a glittering object lying in his palm.

"You ask why we didn't hold fast what we had won, Jo, and right here you have a partial answer to that question. Did you ever see anything like this glass button before?"

"You know I have. It came from the dress of the fellow who calls himself Chris Cresson."

"The Crystal Sport—just so! And when we came out to look at the hawk our fellows had caught, we found—*just this!*"

"Wasn't I right in saying you made an infernal fiasco of it, then?"

"Firebrand Dick was gone, taking with him not only his own horse, but one of ours. With him was gone the one who must have cut his bonds, and only for this bit of cut glass, we'd never have been an atom the wiser for all our wondering and speculation!"

"That never could have happened if you'd had a head as well as hands with you," coldly declared the Empress, her black eyes glowing redly by the light. "Oh, if I'd only been along! If I *only* had!"

"If so, of course all would have run smoothly as sliding down a toboggan built of butter," murmured the gambler with mock meekness in his voice, which was flatly contradicted by the ugly glitter in his eyes. "But when you had a chance to make amends for all our mistakes, how much better did you pan out, old girl?"

"When I had—what do you mean?"

"Who defended Chris Cresson when I declared my firm belief he was crooked and playing a nasty hand against us?"

"I did, and I'm not yet convinced my belief was wrong," boldly asserted the woman, although she must have caught his secret meaning.

"Yet you fell in with the plan to down the Sport."

"A plan of your forming, keep in mind, Frank Mitchell," came the swift interjection. "I fell in with your idea, because you seemed so cock-sure 'twas either that or a fall against us. But when I agreed to play my part in the little trick, what else did I say?"

"Too mighty much for one man to repeat, even if his memory-sheet was big enough to hold it all!"

Empress Jo laughed a bit at this, but it was at his tone rather than his words. Just then she

felt she was scoring a point, and it made her a bit more good-natured.

"Didn't I warn you the Sport would prove a mighty tough man to handle? Didn't I warn you to lay him out cold, before he could fairly show fight? But you—"

"Acted all for the best, and if you hadn't looked too long and too steadily at that Glimmer-glass, you'd be among the very first to see as much, too!"

"If you mean to insinuate—"

"I'm casting no insinuations, Jo, an— you know it. I'm merely mentioning facts which are already on the record. But as I started to say, I couldn't fall wholly in with your idea, because— Why, woman, would you have Judge Lynch taking full possession of the Empire?"

"Of course not, but I'd never spoil my record as you spoiled yours, Frenchy!"

The gambler made an impatient gesture, and his tones were far from loving as he spoke next:

"That's a woman, all over. Why, confound you, girl, wasn't that your own suggestion, then? Didn't you lay the plan? Wasn't it you who wanted one of the boys to openly insult you?"

"Why don't you put it all in, Frank?" in pretty much the same tone of voice came the retort. "Didn't I want that mock insult to end in a finish fight? Didn't I say that we could easily get away with the Sport in that manner, and no one ever know exactly how it all came about, outside of our own selves?"

"Twas mighty easy to lay such a plan, but when it came to action in place of theory?"

"Twould have been even more easy," stubbornly insisted the Empress. "If a free row could have followed that knock-down, as I wanted, even if Barney and the other lads had failed to score their point—"

"As they almost surely would have failed."

"If so, then I surely would not have failed!" declared the woman, with vicious emphasis. "I would have laid Chris Cresson out, and not another living soul could have told whose hand gave him that quietus."

"Some one would have seen it, though, and brought it to light."

CHAPTER XXVI.

UNSHEATHING HER CLAWS.

EMPRESS JO shook her head in negation, yet even with that strong faith in her own daring scheme, she was ready with a defense of the off-chance as presented by the gambler.

"Well, supposing such had been the case, then? I had been insulted by a drunken brute. A gentleman friend attempted to punish the rascal, and in so doing got himself mixed up in a free row.

"Of course, being a woman, I was somewhat excited over all this, but I couldn't think of running away to leave my gallant defender to hear the brunt, and so—shot at the goose, and hit the gander!"

Empress Josephine gave a low laugh at that bit of childhood slang, but Frenchy Frank was hardly in a jovial mood just then, taking his frowning face as evidence.

"Of course it's easy enough to say what might better have been done, or left undone, after a thing is past mending; but at the time I believed my scheme promised the best and safest results."

"I'm willing to grant you credit for meaning well, pardner, but I'd mighty hate to have such luck follow me always!"

"Redmond had a double excuse for downing the Sport, and I surely thought he'd prove equal to the task, too! I never knew of another man who could even come within sight of Hank at shooting by moonlight."

"Until this Crystal Sport came to the front, you mean."

"Of course," with a deepening of that frown. "The devil surely stood at his elbow, for that couldn't be anything more than a chance shot; a crease, by moonlight, too!"

"He called his shot, all the same, though!"

"And you are defending him, even yet?"

"Well, I might be standing up for a worse fellow, I take it, pardner, but maybe I'm running the jest into the ground. Still, you're so cock-sure Frenchy Frank can never make a mistake that it feels mighty good to rub pepper into the raw when once you've taken a tumble!"

"Don't carry it too far, Jo, or you may find some of the hot stuff flying back your way. But back-capping isn't business, and I thought we came in here to do something of that sort?"

"Who first threw out slurs, Frenchy?"

"Never mind. Let's finish with what we've begun. And so—even if we did fail to down Chris Cresson, and lost the services of a mighty convenient tool for a few days—"

"Then Redmond will recover?"

"Sure! 'Twas nothing more than a scalp-wound, and he'll be about by morning, and sound as ever in two or three days."

"Too late to help in fighting those devils, though!"

"I'm not so sure of that, Jo," with a thoughtful frown. "Even if this Sport did help that fellow give us the slip, we played our part so

well in here that Cresson could never have suspected us. And, even so, he surely can't find any proof that we have or had anything to do with that pretended road-agent outfit."

No interruption came until the gambler had finished that slow, reflective speech; but then a short, almost grim laugh broke from the red lips of the Empress, causing him to start and flush up hotly as he caught her mocking glance.

"What's biting you now?" he growlingly demanded. "A fellow'd almost think you'd taken a contract to drive a man crazy with your infernal sneers and jeers! What's tickling your funny, I'd like to know?"

"You are, with your childlike simplicity, Frank! Why, man alive! are your eyes blinded, your wits gone wool-gathering, your ordinary common-sense stowed away in camphor to keep the moths from eating?"

"You surely haven't found any of them, or else you don't know what use they are intended for."

"That's all right, but—speaking about Chris Cresson not suspecting anything, how about Purty Pizen acting as his second and backer in that bit of a racket with Hank Redmond, Frenchy?"

Mitchell shook his head doggedly.

"I'm not so mighty sure of that, either. I'll admit that I did at first think the fellow might possibly be Firebrand Dick, in a new disguise, helping the sport who had helped him before; but now—"

Then the Empress fairly threw aside that false composure, her cheeks winning two spots of scarlet, her white hands in vicious fists and motioning until the jeweled rings flashed and flamed in the lamplight.

"Fancy, and think, and doubt, and— Oh, for a man! Oh, for anything like a man! Oh, if I only had a pal who was even half-way as good a man as Brilliant Bert was!"

Frenchy Frank shrunk back a bit as the Empress sprung to her feet in that vicious fury, but a tinge of color leaped into his pale face at mention of that name: the title which his predecessor in that alliance had worn with notoriety, if not with honor among his fellow-men.

This was not the first time he had been taunted with his inferiority to that once meteoric individual, yet the lash stung just as sharply now as it had the first time he felt its crack, and his white teeth began to show themselves as though preparing for battle.

Empress Jo paid the gambler no heed, just then, but strode to and fro the length of that small chamber, gesticulating wildly, giving full swing to her volcanic passions, so long held in subjection.

It would be difficult as well as needless to report all that passed her lips in those moments of unrestrained passion, but little by little Frenchy Frank plucked up his courage to retort in turn.

Sweeping around with fiery grace, the Empress stopped short in front of her accomplice, a white hand gesticulating swiftly as she spoke:

"One hour of Brilliant Bert in such a crisis as this, would be well worth a year of such—men! Where are they? Who are they? If men, why do they act even more poorly than so many crippled, idiotic kids?"

"If you mean to say—"

"I mean to say just this much, Frank Mitchell, and even your gall isn't great enough to give me the lie, either! I mean to say that when Brilliant Bert was to the fore, I never had to plot and plan and execute and all that!"

"Why was it, then? Because Bert—saints rest him this night! It was because Brilliant Bert asked no man to do work which he could do better! Because he never left to chance what a little pains, trouble or forethought could make a certainty!"

"That is what I meant when I longed for a man as is a man! While Bert was to the fore, all ran smoothly! So long as he lived—"

Thus far the gambler stood it out, but now his hot rage burst bonds, and in an evilly sneering tone he cried out:

"But your Brilliant Bert rode the wooden horse at last!"

"Yes, and took the last leap with a jest and a laugh on his lip, where you—pah! you would have perished from fear, long before the drop could be loosed!"

Contemptuous rather than angry was that swift retort, and once more the gambler shrunk back in his chair. Although only a woman, it was not easy for even a man of strong nerve to face her down in such moments as these, and Mitchell knew from past experience that his wisest course lay in keeping a shrewd silence until the surplus steam was blown off.

Did space and time permit, it would be an interesting study to put on record many of those wild, half-insane ravings which crossed the lips of Empress Josephine during those few minutes, for they told all too plainly in what school, and under what tutor, she had learned the dangerous arts which went to form her record.

And sundry glimpses of that record were given, too, in her utter abandon. Glimpses which, providing the Empress was indeed the Diamond Dell mentioned by the Firebrand Detective, went far toward proving his assertion

that a more dangerous woman never drew breath of life than this same confidence queen.

But Frenchy Frank was learning nothing new through all this tirade. For years back he had been perfectly familiar with the record made by this brilliant beauty, and all he cared for now was to hold her harmless toward himself until that insane fit could wear itself out.

That came about all the more quickly because of that intense fury. No mortal physique could for many minutes resist such a terrible strain, and before long the Empress staggered in her man-like stride, her voice breaking off in a husky gasp, one hand flying up to her throat and the other pressing tightly over her heart.

With cat-like vigilance the gambler had been watching for this collapse, and when it came his assistance was ready.

Catching her falling form in his muscular arms, he supported the Empress back to the easy-chair, then deftly unscrewed a pocket-flask and held the nozzle to her blanched lips.

It was powerful medicine, but this was not the first time the Empress had felt the recuperative effects of fourth-proof brandy, and she almost greedily took a lengthy swallow.

When her lips refused more, the gambler removed the flask, and barely wetting his lips with the powerful liquor, replaced the top and put away the flask.

The woman was gradually recovering her natural color as she lay back in the cushioned chair, but her long-lashed lids were drooping, and her languid eyes were nearly hidden from his sight.

Still, Frenchy Frank knew from past scenes that the Empress was in no physical danger, and that she would quickly recover without more being done for her restoration.

Feeling at ease on this point, then, perhaps it was nothing more than natural for the gambler to feel like making his points while he had a less intractable opposite to deal with and take thought for. And so picking up a thread which had been dropped just prior to that wild outbreak on the woman's part, he said, slowly:

"I thought of pretty much the same thing that struck you, I fancy, Jo, when that fellow chipped on the Crystal Sport's side. And what gave me that impression first, was a doubt as to whether a man could get so dirty, greasy, ragged and generally down-at-heel, unless he was made up after that fashion for a disguise—see?"

Empress Jo nodded slightly, and that nod meant more than assent to his final query: it meant she held to her former belief.

"But I'm not so mighty sure of it, now, Jo. Still, I took pains far enough to set a keen watch over Purty Pizen, and if he makes a crooked move, be sure we'll know of it."

"Maybe too late to parry the blow, though!" murmured Empress Jo.

"Of course that's a chance we've got to take," with a frown. "We failed to stop or knock them out, both in the duel and the knife-throw—"

"Another fizzle!"

"But that wasn't of my get-up, please bear in mind," tartly retorted the gambler. "Johnson undertook that on his own hook, and he's paid the full penalty, I reckon. I'd never have countenanced such a move as that, had the hot-headed fool thought of asking my advice in advance."

"Because 'twas a bold action, eh?" languidly scoffed the woman.

"Of course not, but because 'twould raise a bigger row, create more talk and excitement, than I think at all wise with our affairs in this condition. You must remember that Deadwood is growing, and that we can't kill men just for sport here, now!"

"No, we can't, but others can, it seems!"

"You mean?"

"This escape of the counterfeit diamond-dealer, of course! That is another of the flat flasco-fizzles I spoke about, pardner!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

COMING TO THE POINT.

THERE was a touch of her recent venom in those words, and Empress Josephine gave other evidence as to her rapidly recuperating by sitting erect in her easy-chair and hurling her sentence at her confederate.

Frenchy Frank flushed up redly, and before his unusual color had time to fade away, his retort was made, hardly less spiteful than the one which drew it forth.

"Your crazy fit isn't over yet, girl, or you'd never lay the blame of that on my shoulders! 'Twas all your scheme, from start to finish, and only a woman would have nerve enough to shift the blame that way!"

"Who picked the men to do the work, Frenchy?"

"Who had time to pick any men, with your infernal hurry? Of course the lads on duty had to do—"

"If they only had done, though!"

"They tried, at least, and one of them got his billet for a high lot on the hillside, didn't he? Too thin, my lady," with a short, ugly laugh as he shook one of those white hands—regular "gambler hands" they were, so white, so soft,

so long-fingered and neatly cared for—in front of her face. "The blame for that fiasco-fizzle as you pile it on, belongs to the one whose busy brain hatched it up, not to those who did their level best to carry out hasty orders."

Frenchy Frank rattled this off in haste, just as though he expected an interruption before he could finish his say; but for once his expectation in that respect came to naught.

No doubt that recent severe fit of mad passion had exhausted the woman to an unusual degree, and her spirits had not yet rallied as they doubtless would later on.

Empress Josephine let her tense muscles relax, and her lithe yet powerful form sunk almost limply back in her chair.

Her eyes were downcast, her face remarkably pale for one gifted with her rich, Southern complexion. And her tones were husky and barely audible as she muttered to herself rather than to her ally:

"That Sheeny! Why was he so hot after my diamonds? What made him stare at them so keenly? Why so curious to learn if I had any stones to sell or trade? Surely he wasn't—could he be—"

"That's just what you ought to have made perfectly clear before calling such a dangerous trick for turning," bluntly interposed the gambler, who seemed rather inclined to repay the abuse and criticism he had recently received in such great plenty.

Either his words or his manner served to rouse the Empress once more, and there was much of the former fire in her eyes as they fastened upon his face.

"'Twas a trick that turned to perfection just so long as I had anything to do with the management, Frank Mitchell, and right well you know that! After—of course it had to turn wrong, as all *your* doings are apt to upset!"

"In your mind, why not add, Jo?"

"In your face I'm telling it, rather! You stand responsible for the work your picked men did—or, rather, left undone! And now—Frenchy Frank, you've got to make all that even, or you've turned your last trick, and I know it!"

"What is it you're trying to get at now, Jo?"

"Trying to get at a man, but I'd hate most mightily to even take long odds I'll have better pay for my time than my trouble!" viciously snapped the beautiful virago, even yet unable to resist the temptation to snub her coadjutor. "But here you have it, since you can't see that far through an open hole for yourself."

"That Sheeny is no more a diamond merchant than we are, but he has shown too deep a curiosity concerning my holdings to be let run his length any longer. He got away from your sweet specimens, but now you've just got to ferret him out, and never give it over until you positively know just what and where Morris Rosenblatt is!"

"You're giving me a lighter job than you think for, Josey," said the gambler, with a low chuckle.

"How so? And better do something before laughing, you fraud!"

"Then I've already earned the right to one laugh at least, Sweetness, since I've found out just where your Sheeny has put up for the night, if no longer."

The Empress stared at her ally as though strongly doubting the truth, but as Frenchy Frank met her suspicious gaze without flinching, she demanded:

"What do you mean by that, Frank? That he stops at the Midland? I could have told you that long ago, but it's not at all likely he'd go back there after laying Johnson out for the boneyard."

"Did I say he *had* gone back there? Did I even hint that way, Jo?"

Their eyes met for a brief space, and though the gambler smiled as if he held all the trumps in his own hand, the Empress came again:

"Out with it, pardner, unless you really want me to think it either a lie for a bluff, or else—Speak out, can't you, man?"

"Didn't I say I knew right where to find your Sheeny, Jo?"

"So you said, but 'twouldn't be the first lie I've caught you in, old man. And so—facts and figures, if you please!"

The sporting member seemed to be taking his laughter by installments, for he gave another low, amused chuckle before replying:

"Well, I'm telling it white, just now, old lady, and dealing it off straight as a string. I was at your bit of a circus pretty near as soon as the first, but, somehow, I reckoned I could score higher by keeping my finger out of the mix."

"As being something less dangerous, of course!"

"Have your fling, Josey. They don't harm me, and may be the means of sparing you another of your crazy fits."

"Will you get along, Frank Mitchell?"

"As fast as your woman's tongue will let me, Jo. I'd have been clean there and back again, only for your chipping out of turn—and out of tune, too!"

It really seemed as though the gambler was bent on irritating his confederate beyond all en-

durance, and possibly because she saw something of this, Empress Josephine leaned back in her seat once more, frowningly waiting his pleasure.

"Well, that's a bit more like it, and by way of reward—listen! I was there with the first, as you may know, Jo, but seeing you assume charge of affairs at that end, I bethought me of the missing; and when chance or instinct, call it what suits you best, led me near the Dempster home—"

A malicious laugh from the woman cut his deliberate speech short, and Empress Jo sneeringly asked:

"Why not be honest for once in your life, Mitchell? Why not call it—love, adoration, worship?"

"Well, I might do just that, yet tell no lie, either," coolly retorted the gamester, but with a certain air of bravado which evidenced he was hardly positive just how that admission would be received.

"Why don't you freeze fast to a good thing when it comes your way, Frank?" still lightly asked the Empress.

"Stranger things than that have happened since the world was first formed, my lady? But business ought to come before pleasure, and so—will you listen to what I saw and heard at the Dempster home?"

"If you give me a chance, of course I will. Rattle it off, Frenchy, and I'll try to sift chaff from wheat as you go along," answered the woman, even now unable to quit her "nagging."

"Tell you later just why I thought of taking that line, Empress, but when I heard Barney vow he'd plugged the Sheeny—though it's just as well everybody didn't catch his words right then—something told me I might strike a paying lead over yon' way. And so—I just did, too!"

"Not that you found the Jew there?"

"That's just what I *did* find, old lady, though."

"And you left him—how?"

"Just as I found him, of course."

"I knew it!" sinking back once more in her chair, with a gesture of poorly-suppressed rage and contempt. "If Bert— But the mold was broken when he hopped the twig!"

"That's all right, my lady, but I'd seen quite enough of botch-work through acting on impulse, without stopping to fully reckon up the cost, and I wasn't going to make a bad matter worse by jumping without knowing where to land, and how."

"Go on. What did you do then?"

"Nothing to spoil the doing when the right time rolls 'round, you can rest assured of that much, Empress. For one thing, I made sure your Sheeny diamond dealer wears a disguise."

"I told you that much, didn't I?"

"Possibly, but you tell me so mighty much it's easier to forget a portion than to hold the whole of it. But, as I set out to say, I caught a fair look through the window, and the fellow lay on the bed, being cared for by the old man and his daughter."

"The angelic Agnes—Saint Agnes, I should have said!"

"You've told many a worse lie, Josey, but let that pass, please. And from what I both heard and saw, I know Morris Rosenblatt is no more a German Jew than either you or I are."

"What did you hear and see? Anything about us? Anything to show that he had tumbled to our little trick?"

"Nothing of that sort, no. I could see that he was wearing a disguise, for I heard the old gentleman speak to Agnes about it; and then, as they moved about, I could make it out for myself. He is a young man, too, Empress."

The woman gave a sudden start at this, and there was an odd catch in her breath as she exclaimed:

"A young man, Frank? It wasn't—surely not—Kenneth Horwood?"

It was the gambler's turn now to show surprise, and for a brief space he stared into that pale, almost superstitious face as though unable to fully catch her meaning.

"Kenneth Horwood? As dead man or as ghost?" he asked, with a sneering echo in his tones a moment later.

"You said—Who was it, then?"

"Not that poor, weak-brained fool, be sure, my lady! Why, even if he hadn't fed the worms long ago, young Horwood could no more play such a part than he could fly without wings! And suicides—do they go to the wing-window, wonder?"

"If not him, who could it be, then?"

"Of course I can't swear to it, but this is my opinion, Empress. I believe this false diamond merchant is a detective, and if so, he's almost certainly out here working to trap us for—you know what!"

Once more the fiery temper of his ally flamed forth, and with face as white as his own, save for those hectic spots of color, the Empress cried in deep, stinging scorn:

"A detective? And you left him there? Fairly under your hand, yet you crept away like any other cowardly cur, and left him there—*alive and unhurt?*"

Frenchy Frank showed his teeth in a vicious smile before making reply to this scorching speech.

"Yes, I did just *that*, Empress. But if you'll agree to back me up in my plan, I'll place him in your hands to deal with as you see fit."

"It's a bargain, pardner!" came the instant response.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SHIFTING HIS GROUND.

THE reader will remember that our last sight at the Crystal Sport was taken just after he turned away from the spot where Jimmy Johnson had come by his death, and Barney Watkins had received an installment of the punishment rightly due his many sins; and that he had not taken very many steps toward his hotel, before he discovered that bit of paper pinned to the skirt of his tunic.

Although there was neither address nor signature, Cresson found it an easy matter to interpret the meaning of that brief warning: Firebrand Dick had written it, and he feared lest the Crystal Sport should take some hasty action which might interfere with his own plans.

This was the most reasonable interpretation to give the warning, but as he moved slowly onward in the direction of the Midland Hotel, Chris Cresson found an abundance of thinking-matter.

Who was this man of many names and faces to correspond? Out in the hills he had been Roland Stone. While figuring at the Empire, he had announced himself as Purty Pizen, the Jaw-smith. And only a brief while later he had admitted himself the detective, Firebrand Dick.

Of them all, which was the right cognomen? Or—were any of them rightfully his?

"What is there to prove he is really a detective, even?" mused the troubled Sport while on his homeward way, paying no attention to the sounds given forth by the excited citizens who had scattered in quest of the supposed diamond-dealer, who had at least one human life to answer for when found.

Now that he took the trouble to look back and take notes from memory, Chris Cresson could find no positive proof that this audacious stranger was really what he claimed to be. Instead of being a detective, might he not be some cunning knave, playing an adroit part—something like the other puzzle, Morris Rosenblatt?

Taking it altogether, the adventurer had considerably more to puzzle out than he could fairly arrange during the brief interval it required to reach his hotel; and when once there, the Sport passed directly on to his own chamber, feeling in anything but a talkative mood.

From the sound of voices there was quite a little gathering in the office, but as he had his key with him, and a candle in his room, the Crystal Sport had no occasion to show himself where he would almost certainly become a center of interest and curiosity.

Closing the door behind him, Cresson lit his candle, then threw himself upon the outside of the bed. He had no intention of going to sleep for the time being, hence made no preparations toward that end.

Lying there, hands joined back of his head, staring vacantly up at the boarded ceiling, Chris Cresson gave himself up to thought, trying as best he might to unravel that tangle, which had been bad enough before, but which was growing with every move the parties made.

Possibly an hour had been spent thus, when, without a single preliminary sound, there came a slow, gentle scratching at the outside of his chamber door, and instantly all of his faculties were on the keen alert.

Without moving a muscle the Crystal Sport lay and waited, listening for a more distinctive sound, feeling sure it would come, either for good or for evil.

After a brief interval, that scratching sound was repeated, this time plainer than before, as though he or it who made it, feared lest the occupant of that chamber had fallen asleep, even though the light was left burning.

Never a sound, never a motion made the listening Sport, and after another brief silence, there came a low yet distinct whisper:

"It's Purty Pizen, pardner, with news of M. R."

Unless that was the voice of the stranger who had so unceremoniously given him "the dirty shake" earlier in the evening, Cresson's ears were playing him false, or else a most adroit mimic was waiting out yonder in the darkness.

There was a bare possibility that this last was the case, and so Cresson waited for further information. That was not long delayed.

"It's all right, pardner, and if you'll open up a bit, I'll explain just what I meant by that bit of a note—remember?"

After this there was scarcely room for doubting, and leaving his bed, Chris Cresson turned the key, stepping aside and pressing close to the wall at the side of the door, then saying:

"Come in if you like, stranger!"

"I do like, but there's a flag of truce in each of my fists, please bear in mind," declared the detective, turning knob and pushing the door open, pausing an instant before venturing across the threshold. "Honest Injun, Cresson!"

"All right, my dear boy!" gently said the Sport, and as he looked that way, Firebrand Dick beheld a cocked revolver staring him squarely in the face, and not more than a couple of feet away, either. "Shut the door behind you, please. I'm dreadfully modest, you know, and if any other than such an old and familiar friend as you, dear boy, should happen to look in—why, I'd set my very hair on fire with my blushes!"

"All right, but please don't set mine on fire with that gun," retorted the detective, promptly acting on that hint, but really exhibiting a very creditable amount of nerve under the awkward circumstances.

"Good enough as far as it goes, Dicky-bird," approvingly said the Sport, then adding in those same smooth, persuasive tones: "Kindly oblige me by moving along yonder, pardner; take that seat, if your legs feel in the least trembly; but don't try to slip either hand into a pocket, for I never could stand anything like that!"

As Firebrand Dick meekly complied with each command as issued, Cresson slipped along until his unoccupied hand could grasp and turn the key in its lock. Then, with something like his ordinary manner, he seated himself on the edge of the bed, gazing half-curiously, half-quizzically into the face of his visitor.

"Visited both barber and bath-house, haven't you, cully? And not entirely neglected the gents' furnishing house, either. Well, it makes quite an improvement with the outer man, but as for the inner—wonder if that didn't need renovation still more?"

"That's all right, pardner, and I wouldn't begrudge you your pay for the little trick I played on you awhile ago," soberly declared the detective, "but if you're really the honest gentleman I'm taking you for, there's work of far greater importance awaiting your doing. The only question is, will you lend a helping hand?"

"Never a doubt as to my claim to that title, sir," coolly assured the Man of Cut-glass. "Still, there is another question in my mind, which may have a bearing on the other, and that is—"

"I'll cheerfully pay the penalty of your gibes, Mr. Cresson, provided you'll hear me out, first," a little impatiently cut in Firebrand Dick.

"If I hear you out, will you promise me I may see you out, the next time, Mr. Will-o'-the-Wisp?"

"That, too," with a fleeting smile, then adding in swift, earnest tones: "I saw you yonder at the racket, Cresson, and know you must feel some sort of interest in that fellow—well, call him Morris Rosenblatt, since the name appears to fit his fancy for the present."

"What about him, then?"

"Of course you heard what was said: that he had downed those two rascals without cause or provocation on their part? And you likewise heard what the Empress Josephine said to the crowd?"

"Of course, since I took my ears with me. Go on. What about this Rosenblatt?"

"I'm working round to that, but it's just as well to smooth off the trail as we lay it. If only to prevent the necessity of turning back for a second look," more deliberately said the detective, seemingly satisfied now that he had fairly caught the interest of the Crystalite.

"When I saw that the trouble had caught part of the Empire gang where the wool was short, and heard that woman begin pumping Watkins, my first thought was that they meant to turn the mob against you, and that is why I scribbled the note—you found it, of course?"

"I found it, yes. Go on, will you, pardner?"

Chris Cresson had successfully covered over whatever of interest he might be feeling in the affair by now, and his tones sounded as blank as his face looked. But far from feeling discouraged by this, the detective spoke with even stronger interest than before.

"Of course I meant to see you through the scrape in that case, Mr. Cresson, but when I saw the turn matters were really taking, I felt you were safe enough, and so—I struck another trail which I fancied might prove well worth the risk and trouble of following up."

"You remember that cool sharp at the Empire, of course—Frenchy Frank they call him? Well, he it was I spotted making a sneak out of the crowd, and on the off-chance of making expenses, I followed him."

"Whither?"

"To a cabin out on the edge of town, but I'm not so sure I can describe it so you'd recognize the place," hesitated the detective.

"All right. I reckon it's no killing matter, after all," came the careless reply.

"Not to you, sir, but it may be to another," quickly and soberly declared Firebrand Dick. "I followed that fellow to the cabin, and I kept close watch until I saw him take the fil of his eyes through the lighted window. And be-

fore he left, he shook his clinched hand at some one on the inside, then skurried away as though in hot haste to get somewhere. After Frenchy Frank left, I stole up to the window, and peering inside, I saw what he had seen: Morris Rosenblatt, lying wounded on a bed, being cared for by a man and a woman!"

"The last of which ought to explain the stage antics of our more or less angelic Frenchy, don't you see, pardner?"

"I can't look at it in that light, nor do I believe you do," the detective bluntly declared, then adding:

"I know that Frenchy Frank meditates mischief, and it's nothing more than fair that you and I lend this fellow a friendly hand in need. Surely you're willing that he should have a fair shake, Cresson?"

The Sport frowned slightly as he scanned that face, so interested, yet so difficult to read aright. Surely he was holding something back?

"Tell me, first, why you take such a sudden and powerful interest in this diamond-dealer, Mr. Firebrand?"

"Well, only to mention a single cause for that growing interest, I may have to give him the shoulder, in time," came the deliberate reply.

"Arrest him, you mean?" ejaculated the adventurer. "What for?"

"For taking part in that big diamond-robbery you and I were talking over this evening, sir."

Now that enforced composure fairly gave way, and without even an effort to disguise his intense interest, the Crystal Sport leaned forward on the bed, hoarsely ejaculating:

"What! You surely can't mean—you surely can't think—"

"That this fellow who passes as Morris Rosenblatt, dealer in diamonds and precious stones here in Deadwood, is none other than the long supposed dead man, Kenneth Horwood?"

"Impossible, man alive!"

"So you say, but—I've good reasons for believing young Horwood is alive and in the Black Hills. If Morris Rosenblatt is not he, then—"

"Well?" hoarsely asked the other, his face strangely pale.

"If he is not, then you surely are my man!" said Firebrand Dick.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A DANGEROUS GUEST.

SHARP and distinct that rap on the door echoed through the Dempster home, and following so close upon the partial statement made by the wounded guest as to the peril they might be running through giving him succor, small marvel that father and daughter should turn one to the other with glances almost of fear.

Morris Rosenblatt saw this, and with a generous impulse strove to leave the bed, huskily speaking:

"Back! Let me go—spare you any—"

His bodily powers seemed to be returning, but he was poorly fitted to do battle for himself, much less assume any danger which might menace others; and seeing this with womanly intuition, Agnes Dempster sprang to the couch and gently yet resolutely hindered his leaving it.

"Not yet—you are not fit to— Father?"

Half question, half appeal, drawn forth by the action of Saul Dempster.

Conscious of no sin, no wrong, the sturdy prospector quickly overcame the instinctive doubts which had assailed him, and crossing to the door, removed the fastenings and partly opened the barrier.

"Who is it, and what's wanting?" he demanded, his body filling the crack so as to perfectly shield daughter and guest beyond.

No answer came, nor could he catch sight of the knocker, but the movement of the door caused that piece of paper to flutter a bit: not much, since the leaf was small, but yet enough to catch those keen eyes.

"Who is it wants me?" added the prospector, widening that aperture a little further, and leaning forward until he could win a fair glance along the immediate front of the cabin.

No living mortal was in sight, and when fully satisfied on that point, Saul Dempster stepped forth for a look around his humble home. He found nothing to explain the signal, and hurrying back, tore down that white evidence, and stepping inside, to close and secure the door once more, moved nearer the light to examine that bit of paper more carefully.

"What is it, father?" asked Agnes, her fears yielding in goodly part to curiosity. "What does it all mean, then?"

A deep yet half-stifled exclamation broke from the man's lips as he deciphered that hurried scrawl, then handed the leaf to his daughter. She found even less difficulty than he in making out the words:

"On guard! Frenchy Frank has been taking notes through your window, and went away cursing—guess what, and why?"

Agnes read this, then looked up with pale face and half-frightened eyes, her lips trembling as she uttered:

"Oh, father! That man—I'm afraid of him!"

Morris Rosenblatt had been watching through all, with emotions not so readily described. For

one thing, however, he seemed more uneasy on the account of these good samaritans than for himself.

At that involuntary exclamation, he lifted himself up in bed, and supporting his still partly benumbed body with one hand, huskily spoke:

"I'll go—I must go away!"

Saul Dempster instantly turned that way, and his first glimpse of that pale, almost ghastly face reminded him how totally unfit this stranger was to move, much less quit that friendly shelter for the night air, there to shift for himself.

"You're crazy, man, dear," he said, moving toward the couch. "You're not fit to be let go, even if we were in a hurry to get shut of you."

"Which we surely are not, sir," chimed in Agnes, with even better will. "As for this—"

"May I see it?" asked the diamond-dealer, holding forth a hand.

Agnes shrunk back, but Saul Dempster took the warning and gave it to the wounded stranger. Rosenblatt quickly mastered the contents, and once again did he essay to rise and leave that bed.

His feet were on the floor, and he succeeded in taking a single step; but that was all.

His brain reeled and turned him deathly sick. He staggered and would have fallen to the floor in that sudden dizziness, only for the instant aid rendered him by the prospector, who guided his failing form back to the couch.

Having done this, Dempster moved back a pace, that regained warning in his hand, a troubled frown wrinkling his brows.

Agnes divined something of his mental perplexity, and slipping an arm around him, her soft cheek cozily nestling against his shoulder, murmured a few words which seemed sufficient to banish that cloud from his honest face.

"You're right, little woman, and we'll do it!" he declared, giving his gaunt form a vigorous shake, like one who has decided upon his line of action.

Turning again to where the diamond-dealer lay breathing heavily, though showing signs of speedy rallying from that sudden faintness, the owner of that humble refuge spoke again:

"It's all right, stranger, so far as we're concerned. Surely there'll come no harm to us, who have never even meditated evil, much less wrought it. And you—"

"Father—please!"

"I'm casting no blame, daughter, only 'tis but right that I should speak less—"

Saul Dempster broke off without fully explaining his sentiments, for once more the wounded stranger was attempting to rise in bed, and this time he proved a bit more successful, sitting up without a return of that sickening faintness.

"You're right, sir, and I'm only too anxious to explain how I happened to come—here—like this!"

"Father, he is not strong enough to talk much," murmured Agnes, looking as though she was fairly aching to exercise her womanly authority over this invalid, yet restrained by a fear—of what?

A faint smile came into the stranger's face as he caught sufficient of that whisper to comprehend her fears, and then he said, in turn:

"I'd be weaker yet, Miss Dempster, if I were content to remain here, an almost helpless charge upon your hands, without at least attempting to explain away what I know looks so black against me."

"We're not demanding it, sir, but if you'd really feel better for explaining matters a bit more fully, why—"

"I ask nothing better than that same, sir, only—tell me frankly, I beg—will my remaining here cause you trouble from that villain, Frank Mitchell?"

Those gray eyes turned toward his daughter, that look of uneasiness growing more pronounced. And Agnes likewise betrayed something of consciousness as a blush crept over her face in answer to the stranger's gaze, which followed that of the prospector.

"If Mr. Mitchell is a family friend, sir, I deeply regret—"

"No friend of ours, please Heaven!" came the impulsive reply.

"I'm glad—doubly glad to hear that!" cried the wounded man, his voice sounding much stronger than it had at any time since his coming to this friendly door. "He's an evil man! He's not fit to associate with honest people, and—"

"You're not wise to give way to your emotions, stranger," interposed the owner of that refuge, with a touch of reserve entering his tones. "I reckon maybe you'd better put off more talk until—that is, except naming your friends in town, who might— Eh?"

It was a quick gesture from Rosenblatt which caused the break, and by way of explanation for making that sign, the diamond-dealer said:

"I have no friends in town, sir. I'm here, a stranger, to depend on my own exertions, and with my life in my hand. And that—you see?"

With the ghost of a smile he held up his left hand, where traces of blood still showed too distinctly for the meaning to be mistaken.

Although it could hardly have been so intended, this action and the words which accompanied it, gave Saul Dempster a still more decided feeling of repulsion, and his face surely betrayed as much to those keen if somewhat feverish eyes.

"Not that way—you're taking me wrongly, sir!" the wounded man hastily exclaimed, trying to recover the ground he had so unwittingly lost. "If I've shed blood to-night, 'twas only while trying to save my life from those assassins; I swear it, by the grave of my sainted mother!"

"Father, wait," interposed Agnes once more. "He is not strong enough to bear so much excitement. Wait until later, please?"

"I thank you for that, Miss Dempster," huskily said Rosenblatt, before the father could make answer. "But, if you will kindly allow me, I'd much rather tell—explain what I can about this—ugly scrape."

"Quiet, Aggie. I really reckon 'twould be best so, stranger," said the prospector, gravely. "If we know just what is what, and who is which, maybe we'll feel better fixed for dealing with the lot of it—see?"

Hardly as lucid as might have been, perhaps, but Morris Rosenblatt caught his meaning with sufficient distinctness, and as soon as he could gather strength enough to make his tones audible, he spoke again:

"I can't recall just what or how much I told you before, sir, and you, Miss Dempster, but that don't matter so much. All I've got to say is naked truth, so I can't well contradict myself."

"Then—I'm a detective by trade! And I've come here to the Black Hills, hoping to make the great stroke of my life!"

"After some one, then, I take it, stranger?"

"After some of the worst criminals that ever disgraced the human shape—yes!" with almost savage emphasis, his eyes aglow, his face gaining a slight flush of color the while. "After those whom I have vowed to bring to justice, or add another life to their bloody record by losing my own at their bidding!"

"And they—gave you this?" asked Dempster, with a nod and a motion toward that now bandaged wound.

"'Twas given me by one of their tools, yes!"

"Then they know you are on their track, of course?"

"They surely must know it, and yet—I can't believe they know just who I am!" with a lowering of his tones, and a brief catching to his voice. "But, even so, they're too cowardly to strike at my life save from under cover, and I wouldn't take worry over this last—this warning to you—only—"

"Father! he is too weak for—he is almost fainting, now!" agitatedly whispered Agnes, whose eyes had been watching that working countenance with undisguised interest through all.

"I'm—all right, Miss Dempster," declared Rosenblatt, forcing a smile to his face as his eyes met hers. "I'm hurt pretty bad, and I'm not feeling quite so strong as an ox; but I'd rather die alone without help or friend nigh me, than to fetch fresh peril upon true friends such as you have proved yourselves this night, Mr. Dempster!"

His words were addressed to the father, but his eyes spoke to the daughter, and spoke so eloquently that Agnes felt the warm color suffusing her face and throat, and her eyes sunk before that ardent gaze with a degree of bashfulness such as was far from common in her experience.

Saul Dempster was not too busy weighing the situation to take note of all this, and his brows gathered as he began to realize how dangerous this guest might prove in the end. And with something of that dread in his tones, he said:

"If you'll tell me where to go, sir, I'll look up your friends, and they can see to your removal as quickly as—Eh?"

Morris Rosenblatt sunk back on the bed, pale as a corpse, which he so closely resembled, just then.

CHAPTER XXX.

FRENCHY FRANK'S CONFESSION.

"It's a bargain!" repeated Empress Josephine, leaning forward in her chair, with hand going out to clasp that which Frenchy Frank Mitchell was only too willing to proffer.

Shrewd though he considered himself, and shrewd though he undoubtedly was after his own fashion, the gambler had never thoroughly learned this woman's composition, and too often had he found himself left in the lurch just when he felt most confident of having her hearty co-operation.

"You don't stop to ask just what I need your backing in, Empress?"

"What's the use of wasting breath in asking what you're just aching to give for nothing, pardner?" with a half-sneer in her tones.

"And a promise with you is nothing when you care to take it that way, why don't you add?" snarled the gambler, irritably.

"Because you know as much without my

taking the trouble of repeating an old story. Oh, come off, Frenchy! You know as well as I do that we can't afford to quarrel in good earnest, so long as these devils—How many of them are there on the loose, I wonder?"

"Too many for our fighting indoors, as you say, Josey," with his tones softening and manner growing more conciliating. "We've got to both pull together, old girl, unless we want to go down—or up, even!"

With grim facetiousness the gamester made sign and sound suggestive of one suffering on the gallows, then, without awaiting Empress Jo's comments, he added in graver tones:

"We'll settle all that a bit later on, pardner, but for just now, let me give you an idea as to what I meant when I asked your backing."

"That's not so hard to guess at, Frenchy."

"What do you mean by that, Jo?"

"The little Dempster girl, of course," with a touch of contempt in both face and voice.

"But promulgate, old man!"

"Try to turn it into a jest or a mockery if you like, Jo, but, all the same, it's sober business with me," deliberately said the gambler, closely watching her face as though trying to discount the effect of his risky words. "I never was more in earnest in all my life than I am right now, when I tell you I'm dead stuck on that little Dempster girl, as you call her."

Whatever Mitchell may have anticipated, he certainly did not expect his bold assertion to be so quietly, almost listlessly received by the Empress. But so it was, and his heart beat faster and higher as he read her utter indifference.

"Tell me what you prefer, and I'll call her that then, Frank."

"And you wouldn't—you'll not—"

"Kick up a row, is it?" with arching brows and opening lids. "Why should I be so foolish, man? Am I in the habit of going into tragedies over nothing? And this is worse than naught, to me."

"Well, that's all right, and I'm jolly glad of it, too!" declared the gambler, with an emphasis which could hardly be misunderstood. "And, for a fact, Josey, girl, I've long been struck with this little lady, and now that I begin to see a way to get at it, I'm just red-hot to show her as much, too!"

"Well, you think you see that chance, do you? And now?"

From smiling so decidedly that it verged on a grin, the gambler grew serious, and when he spoke it was in a tone far more sober than he customarily made use of.

"You may reckon I've turned crazy, or am a fool, Jo, but I honestly mean to win Agnes Dempster for a wife, and to teach her to love me as truly as I know I now love her!"

Empress Jo leaned back in her chair, breathing a long, low whistle as she gazed with undisguised curiosity into that pale face opposite.

This was a new and totally unexpected phase in Frenchy Frank Mitchell, and one which she found difficult in realizing.

"And he speaks as though he really meant it all, too!" she muttered barely above her breath while continuing that puzzled stare.

The gambler flushed up hotly, and something of anger came into his snaky-seeming eyes, but he wisely smothered that risky feeling, contenting himself with saying:

"That's all right, if you mean it for a joke, Empress; but the longer you'll wait to find out whether you're winner or loser on the turn."

"All right, Frenchy, and the deal goes on! Only—it's not so often such a marvelous curiosity comes my way, that I can see it turn up without showing curiosity to match: understand?"

"Is it so terrible strange, then, this falling in love with a girl, and wanting her to pay it back on the square?"

"When you are at one side of the board—yes!"

"It's a solid fact, all the same," doggedly repeating: "I'm going to win Agnes Dempster for my wife, and teach her to love me, just as hard and clean-white as I'm loving her this holy minute—so there!"

His tone was a defiance in itself, but for once the Empress declined to accept a challenge. In grave, earnest tones she said:

"Go in, Frenchy, and take my heartiest good wishes with you. Should you win, as I'm hoping you may, that little girl will leave you a great deal better man than she found you, too!"

Analyzed, this speech would have panned out oddly enough, but since it was so much more and better than he had dared expect, the gambler felt grateful in proportion.

"That's hearty, Jo, and I'm in your debt just so far. Then you'll help me play the game out?"

"Wait a bit, Frenchy," with a fleeting smile.

"You've pointed out the rich stake you're playing for, but where am I to come in at?"

"You surely haven't forgotten that counterfeited Sheeny?"

"Is it at all likely, then?"

"Well, isn't he there at the Dempster shack?"

"So you said, yes."

"And so I'll prove to you whenever you care

to test it, Empress. He is there, too mighty lively for us to feel safe, but hardly in a fix for taking a tramp without assistance. Begin to see the point?"

Frenchy Frank gave a low, knowing chuckle as the woman leaned a bit forward in her seat, eyes vividly aglow with deepening interest; but while she might, and no doubt did, catch a portion of his meaning, Empress Josephine evidently preferred plain speech to guess-work.

"Uncover that point a bit further, pardner," she said, coldly. "We've made at least one botch through lack of plain speaking, and it'll hardly answer to run a like risk just now. You mean—what?"

"What's the matter with making a raid on the shanty to-night, yet?" asked the gambler, lowering his tones, although both knew there was no probability of eavesdropping going on in their vicinity.

"Making a raid for what purpose, Frenchy?"

"To carry them both off, of course!" with a touch of irritation at such obtuseness. "Then you can do what you reckon best with your false Sheeny, and I'll begin taming my pretty canary—see?"

Empress Josephine broke into a sneering laugh, her red lips curling with undisguised contempt as she leaned back in her cushioned seat to gaze into that slowly-flushing face opposite.

"Now what's tickling you, I'd like to know?" snarlingly demanded Mitchell, his evil temper once more on top. "What better scheme can you hatch up, I ask you, woman?"

"Well, so far as my game goes, that might answer, but I was wondering at your folly in thinking you could turn the trick that way."

"With the girl, you mean?"

"Of course I mean the girl. You said you wanted to give her a perfectly square deal, didn't you?"

"I did, and so I intend, too. Only—of course I've got to get her where I can be sure of a hearing, haven't I? Say?"

"You're a fool, Frenchy, and I'm standing your best friend in telling you so," bluntly asserted the Empress, quickly adding: "That sort of wooing might possibly win with my sort, but never with a goody-goody girl like that Dempster child. She'd cry her eyes out, and end by fairly hating you, Frank. Can't you see it, man, dear?"

The gambler shook his head doggedly. Always obstinate, he was doubly so now, knowing how he stood with Agnes Dempster so much better than the Empress could know.

"I know what I know, and I'm going to stick to the line of play I've marked out for myself, Jo," he said, coldly. "Only promise me you'll back me up by trying your level best to win her over to my side, and I will, for my part, put Morris Rosenblatt in your hands to treat as you may see fit. What say, Jo?"

"What I said at the send-off, Frenchy: agreed," quickly answered the woman; then adding curiously: "When will you try to turn the trick?"

"To-night, of course. What's the use in waiting longer, and so running the risk of losing your man?"

"None, of course, providing—How about the men to work with?"

"I'll find them in plenty, never you worry, old girl!"

"Don't pick them up at random, though," with a sudden thoughtfulness in both face and voice. "It'll set Deadwood all ablaze, Frenchy!"

"What of it?" with a low, sneering chuckle. "Won't you and I be on deck to help cheer the poor devils who're fighting that same fire? And then, when all's over—eh, Josephine?"

With a sudden gesture the gambler sprang to his feet, showing in both face and actions the strong excitement which his will power was holding in subjection.

"Where are you going to take them, Frank? Fetch 'em here, is it?"

"Never a bit, and you'll see why when you take a second thought, Jo. It'd be too risky, for one thing. No, they'll go the hills, of course."

Without affording further light as to his plans, Frenchy Frank hurried away from the room, eager to set his tools to work.

CHAPTER XXXI.

FORMING AN ALLIANCE.

To all seeming, Detective Firebrand rather expected an explosion to follow that blunt insinuation of his, but if Crystal Chris really caught his thinly-veiled meaning, he gave no outward sign.

Making an impatient gesture, the Sport spoke in his turn:

"You're still holding something in reserve, Mr. Fyerband, and until you can make up your mind to trust me wholly, where's the use in expecting me to meet you on the level?"

"I thought I was speaking with remarkable plainness, friend."

"Possibly so, for one of your chosen profession, but—"

"Is that profession not yours as well, Cresson?"

Christopher gave a positive start at this, and

his dark eyes seemed full of half-angry amazement.

"Well, that *does* bid for the entire bake-shop!" he ejaculated, after a brief stare into that inquisitively glowing face. "Am I a— Well, well! Two or three more innocent breaks like that, pardner, and blamed if I don't have to call your right to the title of detective into question myself!"

"Then you surely are—the other thing!"

"I reckon I must be, although that's rather indefinite," said the Sport, with a low, short chuckle, seemingly gratified rather than displeased by that frowning, perplexed scrutiny. "But this isn't hurrying the business along at a race-horse gait, so— You're holding something back, Firebrand Dick."

"What do you mean by that, Cresson?"

"For one thing, what brought you back here, after giving me the dirty shake, so-fashion? You want something, of course?"

"That's natural, isn't it, my friend?"

"Between friends it may be even so, but— are we that, though?"

"Why not?"

"You tell, for were I to do the talking, there's only one station I could fetch up at, and I'm mightily afraid you wouldn't relish the name of that."

This was turning the tables with a vengeance, and apparently the detective concluded he had better call it even before the tangle grew still worse.

"If you and I are not solid friends, Mr. Cresson, it's because you can't or will not meet me on the same level I've made my mark across. Haven't I given you every chance to explain?"

"What, and why? Are you a peripatetic confessor, Mr. Fyerband?"

"Not exactly that, but I *do* believe you'd be better off, and I know I'd have a mighty less sight to puzzle over, if I could only win a free confession from your lips!" asserted the man from Chicago, with refreshing candor.

Chris Cresson laughed briefly, scanning his odd acquaintance closely, seemingly engaged in making up his mind just how much of this was genuine, and how much owing to guile.

"You carry your nerve along with you, pardner, don't you think?"

"I have to, when dealing with cool hands like you, Cresson," declared Firebrand, with a return to his former admixture of gravity and off-hand candor. "But we're running all around the barn, without making much headway according to string-measure, don't you think?"

"That's self-evident, pardner, but you're giving the lead, remember. I have only to follow."

"Will you follow, though? That's my main reason for coming back at you to-night, Cresson," with real or well-assumed frankness. "Matters are rushing a mighty sight faster than I had any idea of, when last you and I were together, and so—here you see me!"

"I've seen you looking worse, too," with a critical scrutiny. "One would take you for a tin-horn gambler, just setting up as a full-fledged sport, probably through luck running a shoe-string into a regular wad!"

The detective nodded his head in approval, both of this keen judgment, and of the skill with which he himself had selected his disguise.

"That's precisely the character I wanted to act out, Cresson, but now—with your help—I'm beginning to hope I'll wind up this bit of sport without having to play my part much longer. Will you lend me a helping hand, then?"

"Not unless you give me a clearer idea of what you're after."

"Will you do it *then*, though?"

"Tell you later on, pardner," was the cool reply. "If I said yes, on the spur, and then found out you expected me to play against my own hand merely to suit yours, wouldn't there come a healthy old kick? And when I *do* get into a weaving way, after that fashion, a mule isn't in it!"

Hardly the sort of answer the detective hoped to win, but by this time he had studied the Crystal Sport closely enough to realize that he had nothing to gain, and at least valuable time to lose through chaffing, so his words came still nearer the mark both were aiming at, though as yet neither cared to show full trust.

"All right, Cresson, and here she goes! You know by this time what prime object fetched me out here to the Black Hills. Without entering into another dispute or argument, I'll repeat this: I firmly believe Kenneth Horwood is alive, and not far from Deadwood!"

"If so, you'll never put him under arrest for that diamond robbery, Mr. Fyerband. At least, not while my head is hot and my hand heavy!"

"I'll either arrest him, or jerk the real criminals, Cresson," came the cool, deliberate response. "And if you are so certain the young fellow was more sinned against than sinning, why do you hang back and refuse to assist me in bringing the whole truth to light?"

"First, convince me that Kenneth is here, or even alive—"

"First, tell me this: on honor, are you not Kenneth Horwood?"

"On honor, I am not Kenneth Horwood!"

"Then—your hand, old man!" leaning forward with suppressed enthusiasm, his eyes fairly aglow with pleasure at having scored at least one important point.

But the Crystal Sport made no move toward taking the proffered member, gravely saying:

"Time enough for clasping hands, Fyerband, when you've read your title clear. I never did feel easy at wiping out a fellow whose paw I'd crossed in amity—don't you see?"

"All right: 'twill come with heartier goodwill when we've played our part in company, I dare say. And now—let me tell you something."

"I've been pretty busy since I pinned that bit of paper to your skirts, and for one thing, I've found out where Morris Rosenblatt took shelter after leaving his paint-pot upset in the street: understand?"

Chris Cresson nodded his assent, and the detective continued:

"I've just come from investigating the latest row at the Empire," and he gave a brief account of that affair, then added: "And taking it in connection with what followed on the street, I could make only one thing out of it: a deliberate attempt to down Rosenblatt for good and all!"

"For his diamonds, or his money, probably."

"You don't really think that, Cresson, and I'd wager ten to one that no such motive set Frenchy Frank to playing window-spy at yonder cabin, as I saw him doing to-night. If ever man meant bloody murder, that sentiment stuck out all over the villain as he shook hand at that lighted window!"

"Yet he went away without making any such desperate break."

"I'll admit that much, but wasn't it merely to get a good ready? If the crowd *should* tumble to the Sheeny, and once get him in their grip, very few words from either of the Empire magnates would suffice to set the rabble on fire; and you'd ought to know just how much *that* means, out here, Cresson."

"I *do* know, and I'd take a heap sight of trouble rather than have any such muss arise where I'd even have to hear of it," soberly declared the Glimmer-glass Sport. "But we two fellows can't well buck against the whole town, pardner."

"I'm not asking you to share in any such long contract, Cresson, but I *do* ask this much: help me keep an eye on Morris Rosenblatt, for—"

"I'll do better than that, pardner," abruptly cut in the adventurer, as he arose to his feet like one on the point of making a positive move of some description. "I'll go with you to this shanty of refuge you so fortunately discovered, and together we'll ask this oddly-acting gentleman just who and what he really is. See?"

Firebrand Dick seemed slightly taken aback by this business-like proposition, but his hesitation was of brief duration.

"All right, and we'll call it a square bargain, Cresson. But—as I came in, the fancy struck me some shady fellows were acting remarkably like spies; and I'd lay an odd dollar or two at fair odds that they are watching the hotel to see either you or Purty P'izen—"

"In front, of course?"

Firebrand Dick nodded assent.

"All right, then. Let 'em watch on. What's the matter with our taking a short cut by way of the window route?" coolly suggested the Crystal Sport, at the same time moving a hand toward his candle, doubtless intending to extinguish the light as their first move.

But Richard Fyerband quickly checked him, speaking of his own chamber window, which doubtless was still open, and where no attention would be drawn from the enemy by a change of lights.

"We can drop out yonder, just as I've already done once, and if any eyes are fixed on this lighted window of yours, keep 'em fixed by leaving the candle burning. Catch on?"

"You're right, as usual, pardner, and so the old thing shall work."

The two allies quickly left the hotel after the manner outlined, and were hastening toward the Dempster cabin, when a startling event occurred. Chris Cresson fairly stumbled over a prostrate figure, which bore all the appearance of a corpse!

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE BLOW FALLS HEAVILY.

WITHOUT sound or warning Morris Rosenblatt fell back upon his bed, eyes closing and face turning ghastly pale by the lamplight.

Doubtless something of this sudden faintness was caused by the evident suspicion with which he was regarded by Saul Dempster, but the collapse was primarily due to his having overtasked his physical powers before time was given them to fairly rally from the severe shock dealt by his Empire adventure and his severe wound.

That in itself was not of a mortal nature, as Saul Dempster was sufficiently versed in gunshot-wounds to declare; but the hurt was bad enough to need no adverse help from the outside.

Agnes Dempster betrayed strong emotions, yet she was able to lend her father such assistance as he required; and after a few minutes

of wearing anxiety, both man and girl gave a long breath of genuine relief as the stranger showed signs of rallying.

That restoration was quickly made, and, as will sometimes happen, the wounded man actually seemed better for the fainting spell!

He rallied so strongly that Saul Dempster made no further attempt to keep him pillow-fast, although he would not hear to the injured man's leaving his bed, as yet.

"You're not fit for it, and that's the case in a nutshell, sir."

"I'm stronger than you think—stronger than I look," declared Rosenblatt, sitting up and swinging his feet around so as to touch the floor once more.

Yet even as he took this action, the wounded man's eyes closed, and his head gave a weak, dizzy droop before he could summon strength of will sufficient to fight back that sudden faintness.

"You see how— Father, he must not!" agitatedly cried Agnes, her womanly heart aching for this stranger who seemed so helpless, so friendless, so entirely alone in the world.

"What more can I say or do?" muttered the prospector, an arm closing about the girl, his one living relative, his one care, as well as joy and treasure on earth.

"I'm all—right!" almost doggedly insisted the diamond-dealer, rallying as he had rallied before, forcing back that deathly faintness, and gaining strength of body through his strength of will. "I'm all right, sir, and if I had a cane—or crutch—"

"You'll not leave this house until daylight, at least," declared Dempster, possibly moved a bit by the shiver which his encircling arm felt agitating that lithe, graceful shape at his side. "And even not then, unless—"

"I'm awfully grateful to you—both," huskily said Rosenblatt, with his face and eyes speaking even more earnestly. "I'll never forget your kindness while a breath of life is left me, but—that cowardly cur, Frenchy Frank!"

"He's gone, if he ever was here."

"If not here, why that warning?"

"And if one was friendly enough to give us a true warning, wouldn't that one have been honest enough to tell us more? Would he have run away like one guilty of some dirty trick?"

This was a point of view which Morris Rosenblatt had not once taken, and for a brief space it seemed to afford him food for earnest reflection. But then he spoke with even greater earnestness.

"I can't claim to understand the matter better than you do, sir, but one thing is beyond all dispute: my presence here is known to at least one outsider, and whether that person is friend or foe, his knowledge may, by spreading to others, fetch annoyance if not actual peril upon your house."

"You say you've acted only in self-defense, and *that* is no crime."

"No, but it may be made to resemble one, by unscrupulous enemies," argued the diamond-dealer, growing more earnest as he forced himself to take a fair view of the matter. "And sooner than fetch trouble upon your heads, I'd go offer my throat to those who—"

"If you had any friends in town?"

Morris Rosenblatt gave a slight start at this involuntary exclamation, and bowing his head upon a hand, he sat in deep rumination for the space of a full minute. Then, looking up with a faint smile, he said:

"I've just one acquaintance, whom I might claim as a friend, if he once knew who I really am. And—will you take a message to him from me, Mr. Dempster?"

"Where may he be found, sir?"

"He has a room at the Midland Hotel."

"I'll go look him up the first thing in the morning, then, but now you must not—"

"Will you not go to him to-night—at once?" asked the diamond-dealer, almost feverishly, seeming all the more eager because his heart was fighting strongly against his better judgment.

That judgment warned him he ought to win himself stronger backers than Saul or Agnes Dempster could prove themselves, true and honest though they certainly were, but his heart rebelled at voluntarily yielding up a refuge where one whom he had learned to love even before passing a word with her, stood ready to lend him kindly aid, and to nurse him back to strength once more.

"But—you surely wouldn't leave us to-night, sir?"

"Not unless this possible friend—Chris Cresson, he is called—should deem it wisest for all concerned," said Rosenblatt, compromising with himself. "Will you bear a message for me to him, now, Mr. Dempster?"

"If you really wish it so, of course I'll do what lies in my power for you, just as I would for any stranger cast upon our care under like circumstances," just a little stiffly answered the prospector.

Although he knew it would be better and safer for both himself and daughter should this truly dangerous guest take his departure, this dogged refusal to accept his proffered hospitality on that guest's part, touching his honest pride.

Morris Rosenblatt saw nothing of that silent

struggle, for his head was bowed, and his eyes closed, his brain busy trying to decide upon just what message he ought to send to the Crystal Sport. But that period of indecision lasted only a minute or two, and taking a memorandum from an inner pocket, and writing a few words on a blank leaf with the pencil attached, he folded this, and holding it toward Saul Dempster, spoke in far from steady tones:

"I feel as though I was imposing upon good nature, Mr. Dempster, but I earnestly pray Heaven the day may soon come when I can explain everything to you and your daughter. Then—but my possible friend," putting his impulsive speech short as he noted the frown which involuntarily came to the face of the prospector.

"As I said, he rooms at the Midland Hotel, and no doubt he is there at this moment. Please ask for him at the office, and say that you have important business with him. Don't let any one else see this note, for it might make my fix still worse than it is now, and that is needless!"

Having said this much, Morris Rosenblatt resigned that folded bit of paper, and sunk back upon the bed, feeling faint once more, yet forcing a reassuring smile as Agnes gave a low exclamation of anxiety.

Saul Dempster drew his daughter apart for a brief whisper, then he passed through the door and hastened away in the direction of the Midland Hotel, eager to complete his errand, now he had fairly taken the first step in that direction.

He recalled the many occasions on which he had noticed this stranger in the immediate vicinity of his cabin, of recent days and now, also recalling that look and softened tone when Morris Rosenblatt thanked Agnes, little wonder that Saul Dempster would gladly welcome the idea of removing this dangerous guest from under his roof.

But it was not to be after his fashioning, poor fellow!

Hurrying along when fairly inside the town, Saul Dempster was met and recognized by one who had powerful reasons for quieting him for at least the time being; and without sound or word of warning, a cruel blow laid the unsuspecting messenger low, he falling to earth with never a cry, lying as he fell, a seeming corpse!

"The devil's own good luck!" muttered the villain, bending low over his victim, and at the same time casting a keen, wary glance around to make sure no one had witnessed that dastardly assault. "He's knocked clean out of the ring, and now for the other ducks!"

Having paused barely long enough to make sure Saul Dempster was beyond the power of raising an alarm for some considerable time, if indeed he was not slain outright, Frenchy Frank Mitchell arose and hurried away in the direction of the cabin at which he had played window-spy once before on that same night.

Before this spot was fairly gained, he met with several rough-clad fellows, whom he greeted in a friendly manner, then gave them a few hurried directions in a whisper.

This done, the gambler crept up to the window, and stole another look through that convenient crevice, smothering a deep oath as he did so. And yet—what had he seen to so waken his savage wrath?

Nothing more than Agnes Dempster holding a cup of cool water to the feverish lips of the diamond-dealer.

Gliding back to the door, and signing his men to hold themselves in readiness, Frenchy Frank tapped gently against that barrier, then perfectly imitating the voice of Saul Dempster, he softly called forth:

"Unbar, Aggie! I've forgotten the— Let in, daughter!"

Without a thought of deception, Agnes removed the fastenings and opened the door—to be tight-clasped in Mitchell's arms the next instant, while his fellows sprung inside, to pounce upon the wounded diamond-dealer before Morris Rosenblatt could draw a weapon to defend himself or the maiden whom he was fast learning to love so ardently.

"Slit his throat if he even tries to squeal!" ordered Mitchell.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

WATCHING FOR AN OPENING.

JUST there it was too dark for that silent, motionless shape to attract the attention of the hurrying Crystal Sport, and the first intimation Chris Cresson had, came in the shape of that trip and stumble.

With some little difficulty he saved himself from falling outright, and all the more so because he was moved by the strange instinct which warns us against needlessly injuring aught of unoffending flesh and blood; for, at first contact with the unseen obstacle, the adventurer knew it was human.

A low cry of startled warning broke from his lips, and put Firebrand Dick upon the keen alert; but the detective had passed that body by without seeing or touching, and it was not until Cresson could speak that he divined what had gone wrong.

"Look out! Dead or drunken—in the path!"

That was sufficient clue for the quick-witted detective, and by the time Chris Cresson had recovered his lost balance and could turn in that direction, Firebrand Dick was stooping over that dim, indistinctly visible mass.

"Keep an eye out, mate!" he said, in guarded tones as the Crystal Sport came up. "Wait until I strike a match, for— Feels like a dead man, for a fact!"

One sensitive hand was making that examination while the other felt for a match, but now the man from Chicago used both palms to form a shield and reflector for the match he had just ignited.

By this means the tiny glow was hidden from any curious eyes which might be directed toward that quarter, and at the same time the yellow rays were centered right where the light was most needed.

They showed the face of a man something past middle-age, his features slightly distorted, his face marked with blood which matted his iron-gray hair and was still trickling down from a lacerated scalp; but Firebrand Dick took no more than that single glance, for by it he recognized Saul Dempster, although he merely knew the prospector by sight, and could not even have given a guess at his rightful name.

"Devil's to pay, and I just knew it!" was his startled ejaculation, as he dropped match and sprung to his feet. "Lively, Cresson! It's the shanty-owner where our game lies!"

Even before the final words were spoken, the detective was up and away at full speed, heading as directly as possible for the cabin in which he had caught a glimpse of the person upon whom his professional attention seemed about to center; and after a bare second of hesitation, born of doubt as to the propriety of abandoning that unfortunate without at least ascertaining whether he was living or a corpse, Chris Cresson likewise sprung into action, and was quickly at the heels of the Firebrand Detective.

"Dollars to cents we've lost our chance!" came from the lips of the detective as the two men hurried along through the night. "While I was trying to win you over, the other fellow was working! Well—"

"Too much chin!" came the curt interruption from Chris Cresson.

There was no time for getting into a dispute, since the distance to be covered was not great; and despite the excitement which he must naturally be feeling, Firebrand Dick kept to the right trail as surely as though he was a veritable bloodhound; and even as the Crystal Sport sent in that blunt shot, they came in sight of the little cabin.

The moon had sunk almost out of sight by this time, but the heavens were unclouded, and the star-light quite an item. And so, as the two men drew nearer the little home, they mutually made a discovery.

Something was going on there, and living shapes were indistinctly visible as their pace involuntarily slackened a bit, the better for their eyes to work.

The distance was by no means great, but the ground rose higher back of the cabin, thus adding to the indistinctness of that vision.

"Closer—cautious!" muttered Firebrand Dick, gliding silently ahead, all the time using his eyes to the best possible advantage.

That little blotch of moving shapes were quickly resolved into human beings, and as his straining gaze made out even more than that, the Crystal Sport jerked revolver from holster, hissing saying:

"It's the gang, or I'm a liar! They've made a raid, but—jump 'em, hard, pardner!"

Firebrand Dick made the same discovery almost simultaneously, but in spite of his strong interest in the diamond-dealer, he was cooler than the Crystal Sport, and whirling around he caught that weapon with one hand, while the other tried to cover those mustached lips.

"Easy, man! Do you want to kill Horwood?"

Any other name than that would hardly have effected his purpose so swiftly, so surely, but as it came, the Sport flinched and himself threw the pistol-muzzle upward and backward.

Luckily the weapon was not discharged by either hand, and the moving enemy yonder showed no signs of taking the alarm.

"But—they've got him—don't you see?" huskily mumbled Chris Cresson, for once in a way almost completely unmanned.

"Looks that way, too!"

"Then why—jump 'em, man! We can lick 'em out of their boots!"

"And while doing that how about Kenneth Horwood?"

"They're running him off! They'll murder him, if only to cover up their devilish past! Oh, man—"

"Brace up, and be a man, then!" with as much stern scorn as could be crowded into a voice which prudence forced to a whisper. "If they'd run such long chances as this, wouldn't they do more? Wouldn't they knife or shoot the young fellow rather than let him get away?"

Tongues can move with wonderful rapidity when the necessity arises, and all this consumed but a few seconds of time.

During that brief period, however, the gang

was working, and now the two adventurers saw them moving briskly away from the little cabin, even though they were plainly incumbered by prisoners.

So much was beyond all doubt, but the light was not equal to telling the Sport and the detective of what sex those captives were, or, indeed, whether there was more than one or not.

Whoever they held was powerless to lift cry or alarm, and with remarkable celerity the raiding gang passed away from the Dempster cabin and met the fellow who had been left in charge of the horses provided in advance for their retreat.

When Chris Cresson beheld this, he made another brief effort to win the detective's backing for a bold charge and strong fight for the prize so many persons seemed to feel an interest in; but the result was still the same.

"There's five, at least," declared Firebrand Dick, counting the rascals as well as he could by that indistinct light. "We couldn't down 'em all in a lump, and the others—what? They'd down the young fellow first, if only to keep him from bearing witness against them! Can't you see it, Cresson?"

There was just enough shrewd good sense in this manner of reasoning to hold the fiery-tempered Sport in check for the time being; if less, he probably would have spurned the detective as a craven cur, and made the dash on his own hook.

By the time the gang was mounted and ready for taking the route, the two spies had crept up close enough to not only count their numbers, but to make out two captives, bound and muffled, one of them surely being girl or woman!

"And that makes it still harder on us, don't you see?" whispered Firebrand Dick, still keeping a cautious hand on his companion's arm as a more perfect safeguard against any rash break. "A man might see his own row, but a woman—we've got to follow 'em on, Cresson!"

"I'll free Rosenblatt, or leave my bones out here for the wolves!" doggedly muttered the Crystal Sport, moving ahead as the horsemen advanced, heading away from Deadwood.

Provided the nature of the ground is against too rapid progress, it is by no means a difficult matter for a footman to play spy upon a mounted force by night; nearly everything is in favor of the former, and this occasion was not an exception to the general rule.

The gang showed no signs of a fear of pursuit, for their raid had been accomplished without a cry lifting or a shot ringing forth to call attention that way. Then, too, the hour was one which found all honest people housed, and after those first few minutes Deadwood was left far to the rear.

As yet, the two bold adventurers who were taking life in hand by dogging the law-breakers, could make out nothing further than that there were two prisoners: both seated on horseback, with an armed man perched behind the saddle, guiding the horse with arms reaching around the body in front of him.

But then, as time passed on, and the day began to show signs of breaking, the spies could distinguish objects with more readiness. And when the party of horsemen were winding leisurely through that rough, rugged scope of country, their probable plans were being discussed by the two bold fellows who had never lost sight of them since leaving Deadwood.

There was sufficient light now for the friends to recognize Morris Rosenblatt in one of those captives, while the other was just as certainly a woman.

"Well, what comes next, pardner?" asked Crystal Chris, fumbling with his revolver as though strongly tempted to open fire without further delay. "Going to follow them clean to the North Pole?"

"They'll not travel far by daylight, Cresson. We'll keep on their track, and if discovered before they halt for good, we'll shoot to kill! If not, we'll play roots on 'em when they go into camp—see?"

Firebrand Dick laughed grimly at the thoughts thus conjured up.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MAKING A CLEAN SWEEP.

WITHOUT suspecting aught of that persistent espiage, the party of lawless knaves rode steadily on through the hills, now and then casting a careless glance around and toward the rear, but never once catching a glimpse of those crouching, skulking shadows, and never once detecting aught in their surroundings to give them uneasiness or worry.

The last mile or two was covered at a more rapid pace, for the day was dawning, and with such valuable prizes in their care, it was poor judgment to run any unnecessary risks.

Then their present destination was reached: a small, secluded vale, surrounded by rugged hills, and reached by one of several narrow passes by which communication might be had with the more even country around that temporary refuge.

That it was merely a temporary stopping-place was clear from the lack of shelter other than the three or four trees which found root in the little valley, and the fact that the outlaws

made no move toward erecting any sort of cover for either themselves or their captives.

Up to their reaching this valley, the heads of both Morris Rosenblatt and his companion in misfortune had been kept muffled, not enough so as to seriously interfere with their breathing, but preventing them from taking notes as to their route for future use.

Before these mufflers were removed, there was a hurried consultation among the rascals, well beyond earshot of the captives, which ended in a division of their little force; four of the number putting on masks, while the fifth and last, a half-breed, known among his fellows as Injun Joe, stole noiselessly away through a different pass from that by which the secluded valley had been gained.

By making this choice of routes, Injun Joe escaped an encounter with the two spies, who were even then stealing cautiously yet determinedly upon the abductors, feeling sure from certain signs which had not escaped their watchful eyes, that the party was about to halt.

The half-breed was out of sight before the spies gained a point from whence they could overlook the valley and its occupants, and for some little time that absence escaped their notice.

"It's a halt, but for how long?" muttered the Firebrand Detective, as the two men crouched there under cover, taking notes the while.

"Long enough for us to get in our work, provided we don't fall asleep over it," somewhat tartly answered the Crystal Sport. "And I'm serving notice on you right now, cully, that this foot-race has come to an ending."

"Which means?"

"That I'm going to foolish yonder rascals, even if I have to play a lone hand against the pile—with you thrown in to make weight!"

Chris Cresson spoke just as though he meant all he said, too; but he had all along chafed sorely against the cool prudence betrayed by this man from Chicago, and now—well, fighting had got to take the place of delay, and that was all about it!

"Glad to hear it, pardner, for I was on the point of making pretty much the same remark," coolly declared the detective, lifting his head a bit higher, to win a wider view. "Only—I've lost one man out of the crowd, Cresson!"

Glimmer-glass took another view of the scene, and he likewise missed one of the five composing that gang; only four remained within the valley in addition to the two captives.

"Where do you reckon he's gone to, friend?" uneasily asked the detective, taken aback by this totally unexpected change in the case.

"Gone to report to their boss," boldly asserted the Crystal Sport as he took another look at his pistols, making sure no accident had befallen them during that recent crawl among the rocks. "And that's all the more reason why we want to get in our pretty work without losing any more time. See?"

"I'd rather wait until—his going away may spoil all our calculations, Cresson!"

"Not mine, for I calculate to spoil some of yonder rascals—or their good looks, at least," bluntly retorted the Sport, at the same time creeping along to the next bit of cover.

Firebrand Dick saw that all further argument would be but a waste of time and breath, followed the daring Sport, and managed to coax him to wait and watch for a surer opening, by pledging his word to make the assault just as soon as they could see a fair chance of equalizing the forces at their first stroke.

That time came round sooner than either of the spies dared hope for, and by a very little adroit maneuvering, the two adventurers were able to leap from cover, each upon an armed foe, striking as they came.

Knowing as they did that success must be instant and sure, else the other brace of masked villains would ruin all their hopes, and with them claim their lives, neither Firebrand Dick nor Chris Cresson stopped to measure the full force of their blows, or to ask how thick were the skulls those blows were directed against.

The knaves hardly had time to realize that trouble was breaking, and only one of them was able to utter a single broken cry, before they were down, senseless and out of the fight.

"Hands up, you devils!" shouted the Crystal Sport, his revolver instantly covering one of the remaining outlaws. "Kick or squeal, and down goes your—Didn't I tell you so, Johnny?"

One of the masked men was bold or foolish enough to spring aside in hopes of baffling that aim long enough for him to snatch a gun from its scabbard; but Chris Cresson was at the other end of that instrument, and swift as thought his aim shifted to suit, and his last words blended with the sharp explosion of his revolver.

With a fierce cry of pain and rage the tough dropped his gun just as it came away from his hip, and his left hand filled with hot blood as his fingers closed over that maimed right arm.

"Steady, I say!" again cried the Crystal Sport, his pistol again at a level. "Next time I'll shoot to kill, not to wing!"

"Don't shoot—I'm killed a'ready!" groaningly cried out the wounded rascal, while his comrade, flinching, shivering, said never a word as he

found himself covered by the mate to that unerring gun.

"Steady, then, the both of you!" added the Crystal Sport. "Go you, pardner, and disarm the fellows. Keep out of my line, so I can throw 'em cold at the first suspicion of a kick!"

"Lift your dukes, my pretty lad," coolly supplemented the Firebrand Detective as he moved toward the unhurt knave. "Pity to spoil your good looks, but don't forget that I value mine a notch or two higher than I do yours. So—play easy, or you'll fall mighty hard!"

With two such cool customers holding the drop, neither of the thugs were reckless enough to offer further resistance, particularly as they now saw that their mates had already been downed.

First disarming both men, Firebrand Dick quickly tied them, hand and foot, with portions cut and torn from their own equipage; and it was not until the entire quartette had been placed beyond the possibility of doing further mischief, that either of the rescuers paid any close attention to the two captives on whose behalf they had taken such long and dangerous chances.

Chris Cresson was the first to pay them a visit, and his were the hands which set both Agnes Dempster and Morris Rosenblatt at liberty, the man from Chicago appearing afflicted with a bashfulness as sudden in its coming as it was powerful in its entirety.

Naturally enough the rescued ones were greatly excited over the fight which had taken place fairly before their startled eyes, and that no doubt accounted for the agitation betrayed by Agnes; but how about the real or pretended diamond-dealer?

He seemed powerfully affected, and his first motion consisted in lifting hands to face, where that gray beard and mustache appeared woefully rumpled up by the bandage he had worn for so long, or the rough usage he had experienced at the hands of his enemies.

Chris Cresson apparently found nothing out of the regular course in all this, but chattered on in lively fashion, telling much about the discovery and the pursuit, laying the first to pure accident, and the last to a mere love of sport.

"Tisn't often a fellow gets a fair excuse for turning man-hunter, you know, and when the opportunity does offer itself—well, it isn't my mother's son who could throw such a chance over his shoulder!"

But, with all this rattle-te-bang, Chris Cresson was not unmindful of the rescued couple's wants or needs, and through his kindly questions it came out that, so far from suffering detriment through that enforced ride, Morris Rosenblatt felt all the better for it!

Chris Cresson would not admit this strange remedy could produce any such result, so contrary to all rules and regulations, and insisted on playing surgeon to that hurt.

The diamond-dealer yielded, as the easiest method of proving his assertion, and almost before Firebrand Dick understood what was being done, the amateur surgeon was busily engaged over his patient.

Leaving the captured knaves to themselves for the time being, the detective silently glided up behind Chris Cresson as the Sport knelt at the wounded man's side, his eyes filled with an almost fierce glitter as he peered over that shoulder, to see—nothing which he hoped for!

That white shoulder was partially exposed, but it was not the breast Firebrand Dick burned to see, as the surest, quickest and safest method of solving his ugly doubts.

"Well, what's the matter with you, pardner?" bluntly demanded the Crystal Sport, turning head as he felt that hot breath.

"I came to the Black Hills to wind up the Hilton & Jarvis diamond-robbery case," coldly said the Chicago detective. "Now—which one of you two fellows have I got to arrest as Kenneth Horwood?"

As he spoke, his revolver clicked warningly.

CHAPTER XXXV.

TO THE RESCUE.

DESERTED by both friend and foe, Saul Dempster lay as he had fallen beneath that dastardly stroke, until the night was well along toward morning. And when he began to revive, it was with sorely bewildered brain, and a partial loss of memory.

Through instinct more than reasoning, the poor fellow staggeringly made his way back to the cabin home, where he had left his only child, his sole surviving relative, in company with the wounded stranger.

The sight of that familiar place in goodly measure cleared away those mental clouds, but as he failed to catch that expected glow of light through the unshuttered window, Saul Dempster instinctively divined trouble in store for him and his.

With a low, apprehensive cry, the prospector quickened his pace, and his right hand was lifted in readiness to sound the familiar signal to announce his coming, when he saw that the door was flung wide!

And then the worst blow fell!

For a few minutes the poor fellow was fairly

dazed, unable to realize the dread truth, yet feeling his very heart bursting with the terrible knowledge that Aggie—his all in life, was gone!

He wasted precious minutes in calling huskily upon his child, and in groping through the cabin, around the premises, here and there, every spot where the household duties were wont to take the maiden; but then, while feeling for a match in his pockets, Saul Dempster touched the bit of paper bearing that warning against Frenchy Frank Mitchell.

His dazed, indistinct mutterings changed to a fierce cry, and from that moment his actions were more natural, less those of a bewildered lunatic.

He struck a light, and saw for himself that both Agnes and the injured guest were gone, and while there was nothing left behind to certainly show how and why, no entirely sane person could for an instant doubt that force had been called into play in order to effect that terrible change—terrible to Saul Dempster, and surely as terrible to those torn away from friendly shelter.

When he could no longer doubt the meaning of that darkened home, and never once giving thought to his own hurts, Saul Dempster rushed off in the direction of town, an indistinct memory causing him to strike first for the Midland Hotel, where his half-crazed cries and lamentations were not long in collecting a goodly-sized crowd to hear of this, the latest sensation of the hour.

It promised to be more of a sensation than those who caught the first alarm had any idea of, for Saul Dempster, half out of his head, produced both the note written to Chris Cresson by Morris Rosenblatt, and the warning which he had found pinned to his door, charging Frenchy Frank Mitchell with playing window-spy that night.

Still, there could be no room for doubting that an outrage of some description had been attempted, since the condition of the poor fellow who raised that alarm, spoke for itself; a doctor took him in charge, and while pronouncing the hurt nothing very serious, at the same time explained how the stroke, by lacking a very little of being at direct right angles, had narrowly missed crushing the skull.

As the alarm spread throughout the town, it found Frenchy Frank Mitchell swift to respond, and when he learned how shamefully his good name was mixed up with that outrage, his anger was almost too great for expression. And then, as the surest, quickest method of proving his guiltlessness before all the world, lay in running down and bringing the actual criminals to the bar of justice, he flung himself with stern energy into the business of raising a rescuing party.

The gambler said nothing for record when the Crystal Sport could not be found, and the fact of his chamber window being open, with deep footprints on the ground immediately beneath was made known; but there were not lacking other tongues to make scathing comments, and long before the party was in readiness to scour the surrounding hills in quest of the enemy, a general vote would have showed many honest citizens who firmly believed both Chris Cresson and Purty Pizen had taken part in that abduction, far too prominent for strict honesty.

The new day was dawning before all was in readiness to begin that well-nigh hopeless search, for Saul Dempster had lain long with his senses lost, and since then had wasted more precious time, thanks to his great grief and bruised wits.

But now, when the search was fairly taken up, Frenchy Frank Mitchell took the lead as by common consent, and he pushed matters with fiery zeal, yet showing a cool, shrewd generalship such as even his most intimate friends had never thought of crediting him with, to date.

Saul Dempster was one of the party, but when that is said, all is told, so far as his being an important factor in the case is concerned.

The poor fellow was better fitted for bed than for the saddle, but in his dreadful anxiety concerning his idolized child, only death itself could have kept him to the rear.

Truly remarkable success seemed to reward the self-constituted leader of the rescuing party, for Frenchy Frank was the one to first hit off what seemed to be the trail of the ravishers, when once fairly beyond the more frequented grounds surrounding Deadwood; and Frenchy Frank it was who, from time to time, called attention of the trailers to signs which had so far escaped their keen eyes.

These discoveries came from time to time, and at intervals brief enough to hold the enthusiasm of the searchers warm; yet nothing was said or done by the shrewd gambler which would possibly awaken a suspicion of the truth: that he was cunningly directing the party along a course agreed upon beforehand with Injun Joe, the half-breed.

Such was the fact, however, and while taking the same general course as the abductors, it was leading to a point where the false scent was to send the quest far out of the way, soon to be lost entirely, after which the half-breed had left no

further sign, but cut across to join his mates and journey with them to the end.

As a matter of course, much time was wasted at each one of these losses, but as Mitchell justly said, better a slight delay in proving the right, than to try to save time by headlong guesswork, which in the end must almost certainly lose their only chance of finding the enemy and rescuing the captives.

Thus the hours passed along, and it was a little after noon before aught was sighted which even bore the semblance of a human being, keenly as dozens of true eyes were keeping watch, and eagerly though honest hearts were praying for a fair sight of the enemy.

As was the case with nearly all of the minor discoveries made that day, Frenchy Frank Mitchell was the first one to glimpse yonder rapidly-moving figure, and with strangely pale face he commanded a halt, bidding his men hold themselves well under cover until he could decide just who and what yonder moving shape represented.

At a signal from his hand, one trusted aide rode forward with the gambler, both men doing their level best to make out what was coming, and each ready to act should the necessity arise.

"It's a fellow riding tail-on-end!" muttered Mitchell, straining his eyes to their utmost, and then looking still further off than the reckless rider now was; to utter another savagely-grating oath as he caught sight of at least two more shapes just coming into view from yonder far-away tract of rugged rocks and wind-bent shrubbery.

"A chase, boss!" ventured the fellow selected by Mitchell to share his advance. "And—look!" with his interest suddenly increasing as his marvelously keen eyes made a real or half-fancied discovery. "Who does that head critter look like, Frenchy?"

The gambler had been devoting his attention to those more distant shapes, but now he shifted his gaze, and for several seconds stared with painful intensity at the nearer horseman.

"Isn't it—Hank Redmond, for rocks!"

"The deuce!" exploded Frenchy Frank, the hand which was gripping a pistol-butt now jerking forth the weapon even as he, too, made that startling discovery. "On, to meet him, Dan! We've got to drop those two devils, yonder, and that before the gang behind us can take a tumble to the trick we're turning!"

As he savagely uttered these words, the arch-villain rode rapidly ahead, making a signal to catch the notice of that fugitive, fearing lest he render success more difficult, if not impossible, by veering to the right or left in case the ground should seem more favorable in that direction.

After that brief hesitation, there was no longer any doubt as to the identity of the fugitive, and knowing that such a flight could only mean danger to his cherished plans, Frenchy Frank urged his horse onward at reckless speed, giving a low snarl of satisfaction as he saw Hank Redmond recognize his signals.

While this was taking place, the other knave was paying more attention to the pursuers, and as they came into more open view, where the sunlight could strike them fairly, a flashing, glimmering, sparkling light seemed to envelop the leading horseman, and a sharp cry turned the attention of the gambler in that direction.

"The Crystal Sport, or I'm a howling liar!"

"Now we've got to down 'em—just got to lay 'em out!" viciously vowed the gamester, as he drew rein and sprang to the ground directly in line with the chase, knowing well that Hank Redmond would ride straight, and hoping that the pursuers might speed unwittingly on to their doom!

His horse reeking with sweat and bleeding from more than one injury caused by the rocks over which that race for life had led, Hank Redmond came up, and almost tumbling out of the saddle, cried hoarsely:

"Gi' me a gun! I didn't have— Kill 'em, or we're cold meat!"

And arming the road-agent, fire was quickly opened upon the two pursuers, with deadly purpose, to say the least.

CHAPTER XXXVI. COOLING A FIREBRAND.

The Chicago detective uttered those words with grim emphasis, yet there was something like a smile in his eyes as they flashed from face to face, and though his revolver was drawn and cocked, he hardly held it as a man who really expected to be obliged to use the weapon.

Morris Rosenblatt gave a subdued cry at that blunt query, but the strong hand of the Crystal Sport kept him from rising, and Cresson looked undauntedly into that face for a few moments before bluntly asking:

"Now who told you to begin playing fool again, pardner?"

"That's all right, old fellow," with a touch of doggedness coming into his tones. "I've played second fiddle long enough, and now—I ask it over once more: which one of you two is Kenneth Horwood?"

"Who said either of us was?"

"I saw it new, if no person said it before."

One of you two men is Kenneth Horwood, and that one is my meat!"

Pale and trembling, Agnes Dempster had watched and listened to all this, but now, as that voice grew sterner, and she saw that ugly weapon seemingly about to come into play, a cry of fright and imploring broke from her lips, and she started to spring between the enemies, as these men surely must be.

But as Morris Rosenblatt caught that sound, and saw her alarm, he lost sight of his own fears, and boldly cried out:

"I'm Kenneth Horwood, sir, and if you have a warrant for my arrest, show it, and I'll surrender!"

Swift as thought Chris Cresson grasped that weapon, and with a single wrench tore it from the detective's hand, at the same time whipping forth one of his own guns and thrusting its muzzle fairly into that sturdy face, grimly crying:

"Cool off, Firebrand! Must I lift your roof, pardner?"

Instead of making a struggle, or of attempting to regain the advantage thus suddenly lost, the detective broke into a low, amused laugh, showing not the slightest annoyance or personal fear, even with that pistol almost rubbing the tip of his nose.

"Take it easy, Glimmer-glass," he spoke, in tones to suit that demeanor. "All I wanted was to find out just which one of you fellows had the best right to answer to that name; and now—"

"I am Kenneth Horwood, sir," repeated the one who has thus far figured as Morris Rosenblatt, the diamond-dealer, lifting himself to a sitting position, closing the garments over those bandages.

"Then you ought to be able to show a peculiarly shaped scar on your—"

"Like this, you mean," in steadier tones, as that red crescent was briefly revealed. "And now—"

"And now, Glimmer-glass, don't you reckon we'd both be a bit more comfortable if you'd just—"

"I'm just on the point of doing so, Mr. Fyerband," interposed the Crystal Sport, rising to his feet without giving the detective even the shadow of a chance to turn the tables. "And as the first movement, will you elevate your dukes?"

"But, man alive—"

"That's more than you'll be in a holy minute, Firebrand, unless you prove yourself an apter pupil. Last call—hands up!"

With uncompromising earnestness came that command, and with fading smile the detective complied, beginning to realize that matters were far from being so agreeably shaping themselves as he had recently imagined.

With much the same dexterity displayed by the detective in disarming and binding the road-agents, Crystal Chris now rendered Firebrand Dick powerless to work mischief to any person, placing him in a fairly comfortable position near the little camp-fire which the enemy had kindled for the purpose of preparing their breakfast.

"That'll do for a starter, I reckon," the Sport declared, stepping back and cocking head to one side as he viewed his work. "I've seen many a better-looking fellow than you, pull the hemp supplied by Judge Lynch, Richard; and if such should—"

"You don't dare, Chris Cresson!"

"That's what you say now. If there happens to be any method of sending dispatches from the lower world, pardner, we'll be glad all over to hear from you on that same point a bit later on!"

Turning away, Chris Cresson spoke for some little time with the wounded man, in guarded whispers. Either his words, or their subject matter, caused the admitted Kenneth Horwood great excitement; but beyond the mere fact that such was the case, Firebrand Dick was kept in the dark, and feeling very uncomfortable, too.

Crystal Chris paid a visit to Hank Redmond and the other road-agents before returning to his latest captive; but they were securely bound, and no danger was to be apprehended from that quarter.

While the Sport was engaged after this fashion, Kenneth Horwood, to give him the name he had the best right to claim, was explaining matters to Agnes Dempster, whose good opinion he now valued above all the world else. And he was not nearly through with his explanation when Crystal Chris begged pardon for chipping, but would the gentleman consent to enlighten the stranger from Chicago a bit further?

Kenneth expressed himself as more than willing to do this, provided Miss Dempster would honor him by listening to his explanation.

"Only for you—and your noble father," by an afterthought, "I must have perished with this awful stain still covering my name, my memory; but now—thanks to friends here on earth, and another in heaven, the time is near at hand when all the world will know how terribly I have suffered, merely through a venial fault!"

It was not long before the little group was

arranged to the satisfaction of all, unless it might be Firebrand Dick, who visibly chafed against his unmerited bonds. And then Kenneth Horwood began the story of his past life.

To give a literal report here would merely be to repeat much of that already put on record, for Kenneth Horwood told his story pretty much as the papers of the day had given it to the world.

He admitted his rash credulity in putting such full trust in the man and woman whose acquaintance he had made in the dining-room of the hotel where all were boarding at the time.

"And I was wrong in permitting them to go with me inside the store, after hours, and still more so in opening vault and safe for their inspection; but there lay my worst sin. All the rest was theirs to do, mine to pay the penalty!"

He told how terribly he suffered, in mind even more than in body, before help came; but all that was as nothing compared with his torment later on, when eyes of suspicion turned his way, when old friends began to avoid him, when he learnt that a warrant of arrest had at an early hour been sworn out against him, and was merely withheld in hopes of his betraying his confederates, if permitted to remain free.

"At last I couldn't stand it, longer. I had not a relative to uphold me with sympathy or trust, and seeing no hopes of clearing myself or finding the actual criminals, I determined to drown myself!"

"Whose body was that, found and buried for yours, then?"

"I don't know. I meant to drown myself, and so stated in a note which I wrote to my only living relative, then across the ocean—"

"Chris Cresson, for dollars!" impulsively cried Firebrand Dick, his perplexed countenance clearing up in goodly measure.

"I mailed that explanation, then went down to the lake-shore. But when I knelt down to ask forgiveness in prayer, I found I couldn't carry out my desperate resolution, and so—just how 'twould be far too long a story for telling now—I changed my name and face, even my figure, and leaving Chicago without detection, began a personal hunt for the man and woman who had brought all this wretchedness upon me."

"And you found them out here in Deadwood!" once more broke in the detective. "You struck the same trail I did! You know that Diamond Dell and a pal robbed Hilton & Jarvis. You know that Empress Josephine St. John is the old-time Confidence Queen!"

"Before high Heaven I believe that it is the truth!" earnestly cried Kenneth Horwood.

"And if this hot-head hadn't caught the drop so smartly, just as he did, I'd have told you as much, the instant I was fairly certain which one of you fellows was the real Kenneth!" asserted Firebrand Dick, with a frown of disgust toward the now laughing Crystal Sport.

"Tit for tat, Richard, old man!" cried Chris Cresson, as he removed those bonds and handed back the weapons taken from the detective. "You played it mighty low down on yours truly, once or twice, of late, and so— Understand?"

"You merely played to get even, then?" slowly asked Fyerband.

"That's what! For I'd pretty well made up my mind that you were willing to give Kenneth Horwood a fair shake, and I knew that would be all he needed: one of his name couldn't stoop to crime, even were a wagon-load of diamonds to be won by so sinning!"

"Modesty, thy name is— Not Glimmer-glass, at any rate!"

With matters once more on a friendly footing, the little group—of which Agnes Dempster formed one, by virtue of the helping hand she had held forth when Kenneth Horwood was in such sore extremity—sat together, eating the food so thoughtfully provided by the abductors for themselves, and discussing the present, the future, as well as the past.

Richard Fyerband explained how he had studied out a different theory from that entertained by the authorities as to the bottom facts of that great robbery, and was telling how he had learned his probable game was to be found out in the Black Hills, when an interruption came.

Agnes Dempster uttered a sharp cry, and they saw her pointing to where one of the prisoners was just leaping upon a horse, to dash away across the valley and into a narrow pass, at full speed!

CHAPTER XXXVII. HUNTED DOWN.

So entirely unexpected was this break-away that neither Chris Cresson nor Firebrand Dick thought of their weapons until after the fugitive had vanished from sight amid those thick-lying rocks which masked the mouth of that narrow pass leading out of the little valley.

And even then they could not believe it possible that the reckless rider was one of their prisoners. It could only be a venturesome horse-thief, who—

"Look! One of 'em's gone!" cried Kenneth Horwood, now on his feet and pointing toward

the spot where the prisoners had been placed, under shade of a couple of stunted trees.

With that for a guide, the rescuers sprung across, to find that the wounded man spoke sooth: one of their captives had surely broken away, and as Chris Cresson flashed a glance over the others, he cried out in savage tones:

"Hank Redmond, by the Eternal! Mount and chase, pard! We've got to catch him, or— You stand guard, Kenneth, until we're back!"

Even before those words could pass the Crystal Sport's lips, Firebrand Dick was in motion toward the tethered animals, and only pausing long enough to cast that warning toward young Horwood, Chris Cresson likewise dashed off in that same direction.

Fortunately for their hopes of retrieving this error, Redmond had been unable to stampede the other animals, or else had feared to lose precious time in making the attempt.

"No time for saddling up!" called out the Chicago detective, as he slipped on a bridle, then slashed a knife across the picket-rope. "We've got to get him, or he'll kick all the fat into the fire!"

With the keen instinct of a born man-hunter, Chris Cresson imitated the example thus set him, and so successfully that Firebrand Dick had hardly crossed the back of his animal before the Crystal Sport was mounted and dashing off along the still hot trail of the fugitive.

Apparently neither of the men gave a second thought to the wounded man whom they had left in charge of three desperate criminals, although this might have been different had they not supposed Redmond's escape had been wholly owing to his own exertions, unassisted by one still outside of bonds.

With Firebrand Dick only a few yards in advance, the two pursuers left the little valley and thundered through the narrow pass where they had caught their last glimpse of the runaway desperado; and then a low, but satisfied cheer broke from the detective's lips as he caught sight of their human game, furiously riding along, yet at a far less distance in advance than he had dared hope for.

Moments seem terribly long when so much is at stake, however, and thanks to the warning cry given by Agnes Dempster, very little time was gained by the fugitive before the chase opened.

"He's our meat, Cresson!" cried Firebrand Dick, with a fleeting glance over a shoulder. "If I had a rifle, I could drop him right now!"

"It's catching, not killing, though," came the cool, determined reply. "Redmond knows all the ropes, and with him to help, we can condemn the evil outfit without half trying! See?"

"All right, and catching goes! Bottle, bird, and box of cigars that I give him the collar first!"

"Taken, old man!"

Yet it proved to be a much longer race than either of those sanguine pursuers at first imagined, for Hank Redmond had not taken the very worst of the horses, nor was he at all inclined to let humanity toward brute interfere with his escape.

Still, little by little the intervening distance was lessened, and by the time a couple of miles of that rough ground had been covered, the detective and his comrade were fairly within long pistol-range of the desperado rascal who was mercilessly lashing his panting horse, even yet hoping to effect his escape.

"We've got him now, Cresson, and it's all over but the shouting!"

"We had him then, but he got away, and even now— 'Ware hawks, man! Breakers ahead, or I'm a liar!"

The keen eyes of the Crystal Sport caught a glimpse of figures far in advance, and brief though that glimpse was, he felt fairly confident they were not only human, but felt a strong interest in that chase; if not, what could those excited gestures have meant?

"No matter," doggedly vowed the detective, urging his own panting steed onward with hand and heel, "he's our meat, and we're going to have him although a thousand— Ready with your guns, pardner!"

Even now they might have brought down the fugitive with their pistols, possibly without inflicting serious injury to the man by merely shooting to kill or cripple the horse; but in place of taking these chances, the two men thundered on, reckless of a possible ambuscade, now that those indistinctly-seen shapes had melted away out of sight.

"Steady, Redmond!" cried out Firebrand Dick, barely loud enough for the fugitive to catch. "You're our meat, but we want it hot, not cold! Surrender, and we'll treat you white as—"

"The band opens, pard!" shouted Chris Cresson, as they saw Redmond violently yank up his jaded mount and fairly roll from his back. "Look out for— I knew it!"

The Crystal Sport ducked low along the neck of his horse as he saw more than one human figure spring into view from among those rocks,

and as the fire-arms began to speak, his chase turned into a charge, and his guns to echo back those shots.

There was to be no skulking now! There was no thought given to parley, nor even to prudence, so far as the two pursuers were concerned; and boldly as Chris Cresson charged to a close, just as desperately was he backed up by Firebrand Dick.

Streams of flame-tinged smoke puffed out ahead of them, and brief as was the space which divided enemy from enemy, swift as was that rush, there proved to be time enough for deadly work ere the close came.

Both Frenchy Frank and Hank Redmond went down, almost at the same instant, and side by side, while Dan Weaver gave a howl of mingled pain and fear as he broke away in flight through the rocks and bushes.

"More coming!" cried Cresson as he sprung from his horse by the side of his fallen game. "Down, pard, and hold your man! Don't let—I say, you fellows!" lifting his voice higher, and calling forth a stern warning to the people whom he caught a glimpse of as they hurried toward the spot.

"Flag of truce!" pealed forth the Chicago detective, almost at the same time, springing from his mount and planting a heavy foot upon the back of Frenchy Frank Mitchell, his fingers swiftly reloading his emptied revolver. "We're honest, what are you?"

"Stop, or we'll stop you!" cried the Crystal Sport, as a supplement. "We're officers of the law, acting under regular warrants of arrest, and you trouble us at your own peril!"

"You're a man of business, Mr. Wheatley," added Firebrand Dick, recognizing a merchant of prominent standing at Deadwood. "Flag of truce until we can explain the matter to you all. If we can't do that, surely you're numerous enough to down us, later on?"

These swift appeals had the desired effect, now that Frenchy Frank, the acknowledged leader of the force, was downed and past lifting an objection; and before the gambler could recover his senses from wound and fall, Firebrand Dick had shown his credentials as a regularly commissioned detective, and had even begun to recite some of the crimes committed by the fellows who had dropped before their fire.

Explanations given and accepted, our two friends lost no further time in caring for their human game, and when the two knaves rallied from their hurts sufficiently to think of further fighting, they were both disarmed and helpless.

Frenchy Frank was savage over "this shameful outrage," and even when confronted by his captors with his latest outrage, the abduction of Morris Rosenblatt and Agnes Dempster, he remained defiant, and refused to admit his guilt.

Saul Dempster was all unnerved as he listened to this, and he was only quieted when both Firebrand Dick and Chris Cresson assured him the maiden had suffered no harm, and was even then safe and sound, at no very considerable distance away.

With this point fairly disposed of for the moment, the two adventurers fell to questioning their wounded prisoners, but Frenchy Frank gave them back curses and defiance, refusing to admit or confess aught.

Not so with Hank Redmond, however. His injuries were even worse than those received by his chief, and his nerve was shattered. He wasted not a little time in groaning and bemoaning his untimely fate, but then Chris Cresson got his tongue to wagging, and the truth began to leak out.

For one thing, Redmond gave a brief explanation of his escape, and told how Injun Joe, the half-breed, had come back from his secret mission, to find his comrades disarmed and in bonds.

He managed to crawl close enough to Hank Redmond to cut him free, then left him the knife for the purpose of freeing his mates, saying that he dared lose no more time, nor run further risks.

"Where did he go, then?" asked Cresson, beginning to divine the rest.

"To warn the Empress, he said," groaned the wounded knave. "He said his fust duty—to her, and—"

Firebrand Dick could wait for no more, but excitedly cried:

"And if she gets a fair start, good-by to both Diamond Dell and the stolen jewels! To horse, pardner! We've got to cut her off, or— We've just got to, I'm telling you!"

Chris Cresson was hardly less wrought up by this information, but he was cool enough to call for volunteers, and then directing the others how to find maid, man and prisoners, leaving them to guard the wounded criminals, the little squad dashed away to wind up the affair.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HER LAST RECORD.

THE afternoon sun was sinking low when two riders moved at a rapid pace away from the town of Deadwood, taking the same route at a point on which this story opened.

In the lead rode a tall, slender, yet slouching and far from graceful-looking fellow of Indian descent, even if he was not entirely red.

He was well armed, and his mount, though undersized and looking as though comb nor brush had ever received an introduction to its exterior, was plainly of the "singd cat" order: very much better than it looked.

Close behind this more or less noble son of the forest and mountains, came another rider, also seated astride, yet plainly of a different sex from the leader; but, being a squaw of his race, what else was to be expected?

Without word or sign passing between the twain, they rode on at as rapid a rate as circumstances would permit, and in this unusual haste alone lay anything suspicious: without an enemy or valuable game behind or in front, when did ever Indian so exert himself?

For more than an hour this rapid progress had been maintained, but then the buck quickly jerked up the pony, with a guttural exclamation, which found a strange echo from the squaw:

"What is it, Joe?"

"Hoss coming—dat way!" with a nod ahead, his dusky hands busied with the lock of his Winchester the while.

"Not the stage; on, Joe!" with sudden fury in her musical tones. "We can't be blocked now! We must ride through or over 'em!"

Possibly the boldest course was as wise as any, under the circumstances. To turn back would mean nothing better than a straight chase nearly to the confines of Deadwood. The sides of that trail were impracticable for horses; so better trust to luck and bold daring!

Without giving the buck a chance to argue for or against such a course, the squaw drew a revolver from beneath her dirty blanket, and urging her shaggy pony on, she dashed past the Indian before he could fairly realize what her intention was.

Then, heels battering fiercely against the ribs of his pony, and black eyes glaring ahead as he gripped his Winchester, Injun Joe plunged onward to save or share the fate of his worshiped mistress!

In less than a score of seconds from touching up her pony, the seeming squaw came in sight of the party whose hoof-strokes had alarmed the half-breed, and at their head rode a figure whose person seemed framed in fire of many hues—the "Glimmer-glass" of Purty Pizen, the Jaw-smith!

Sharp cries broke from the party of horsemen as they caught sight of the squaw, but before they could even recognize her sex or race, the seemingly crazed creature screamed shrilly, opening fire with her revolver, urging her pony on at full charge!

And the next instant a second rider came up with a rush, his rifle beginning to talk the moment he passed that sharp turn in the trail.

What else could a party do, when so savagely assailed?

Shot echoed back shot, and amidst all that mad excitement there rung forth the wild, fierce yell of Injun Joe as he caught a glimpse of squaw and pony going down in a tangled heap together, hardly two yards away from where that glassy shape was visible through the curling smoke-wreaths.

"Don't—you devils! Don't kill—she—a woman!"

And the last word was hardly clear of his lips before he, too, went down in that blood-stained road, never to rise again without assistance!

"Back! Hold fire, men!" thundered the Crystal Sport, leaping squarely over the head of his horse as the quickest method of getting within covering distance of that first-falling enemy. "It's the Empress, and if she isn't—"

Something resembling the squaw partially rose from that tangle, and with a barely articulate cry of defiance and undying hatred, she fired one shot, the flame from her weapon almost reaching Cool Chris Cresson, who reeled back at her shot, one hand flying to his breast like one hard hit.

"Never! You die yourself, Kenneth Horwood!" shrieked the Empress, as she beheld her sparkling adversary reel and fall.

And then, as Firebrand Dick came leaping through the smoke to save or to hold, the desperate woman turned the muzzle of her pistol upon herself, and with that final explosion, her record came to an earthly end!

While others gave their kindest attention to the wounded, among whom was Cool Chris Cresson, the Crystal Sport, Firebrand Dick first assured himself that the woman disguised as an Indian squaw was indeed she whom Deadwood had known only as "Empress Josephine," the woman sport and gambler; then felt with practiced fingers for the valuable treasure which he felt morally certain the beauty with a record was bearing about with her on this flitting.

Discovering a hidden package, and feeling of it sufficiently to assure himself that it contained those precious stones, the detective lifted the body in his arms, bearing it to one side of

the road, then turned his attention toward Injun Joe.

The half-breed was fatally injured, but still in possession of his senses, and able to talk, after a fashion.

Approaching death seemed to have subdued his fierce nature in a goodly measure, and from his lips the Firebrand Detective learned much that was of both interest and service to him.

Among other things was the story of the abduction, under direction of Frenchy Frank Mitchell, who had left them when the horses were brought forth from cover. He wanted to be ready with an *alibi* in case of after investigation.

Injun Joe likewise told how he set Hank Redmond free, then hurried away to warn the mistress whom he fairly worshiped. And then—the meeting on this trail, which had ended so terribly!

Leaving Injun Joe to gasp away the feeble remnant of his life, the Firebrand Detective turned to Cool Chris, whom he found having his wound examined by one of the volunteers.

"Nothing worse than a bit of blood-letting," the Sport cheerily assured; but his dark-brown eyes were anxiously questioning the man from Chicago, who gave a slight nod of assurance.

"We've got 'em—got all we started after, Cresson, although I'm more than sorry we couldn't take her, alive!"

"I'm not so mighty sure of that, for my part," soberly answered the Crystal Sport, his face looking very grave, just then. "After all, she was a woman, and I reckon she'd rather go this way than feel the irons!"

Firebrand Dick shook his head in actual melancholy.

Could he have "run in" both Diamond Dell and Frenchy Frank, alive and unharmed, his triumph would have been perfect, especially as he knew now that his proofs of the perfect innocence of Kenneth Horwood would be accepted as final, by any court of justice; but now—well, he must make the most of his other prize, the gambler!

And to dispose of that portion of the subject once for all, it may be put on record right here that Firebrand Dick *did* take Frank Mitchell back to Chicago, where he stood trial, and was sentenced to a lengthy term of years in "the Pen."

Part of the "evidence" consisted of the diamonds themselves, which the bold robbers had not dared dispose of, as yet. They were waiting for the excitement to wholly die out, when they intended to reap their harvest.

Instead, that harvest was death to one, imprisonment to the other! Cool Chris was not dangerously wounded, and was able to go with his younger brother, Kenneth Horwood, back to Chicago, and to stand by the side of the once confidential clerk when his fame was cleared of all stain!

Not until that trial was over did Firebrand Dick fully understand what relationship those two men held; but then he knew Kenneth Horwood, when contemplating suicide, had written a long and truthful account of his troubles to his elder brother, Austin Horwood, who was then traveling for pleasure on the Continent.

That brother hastened home as soon as possible, but it was to find a body buried as that of his unfortunate brother, and learning how universal was the belief in Kenneth Horwood's guilt, Austin vowed to keep his identity secret until he had probed the mystery to the very bottom, and brought the actual criminals to the bar of justice.

Hank Redmond died of his hurts, but not until after fully implicating Frenchy Frank Mitchell, and explaining the few mysteries yet remaining. Then, with vain regrets for his wasted past, he "crossed the range!"

Saul Dempster in the end became reconciled to the thoughts of losing a daughter, since he gained thereby a son, and both of "his children" insisted on his quitting work and living with them. And so it came to pass!

Austin Horwood—"Cool Chris Cresson," the "Crystal Sport," or "Glimmer-glass,"—waited until his brother's fate was settled (in a double sense), then he recrossed the ocean, to ultimately return with a fair and loving bride in his company.

Richard Fyerband remained in harness as a detective, but the reward given him by the firm of Hilton & Jarvis for recovering the diamonds which they had long since given up all hopes of ever seeing again, as their own property, at least, enabled him to set up an office and small detective force of his own.

Still, this degree of prosperity did not hinder him from taking up cases on his own hook, and more than once after this peculiar diamond case, "Firebrand Dick" showed himself as bold, cunning, and successful as he ever had in his earlier days.

THE END.

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